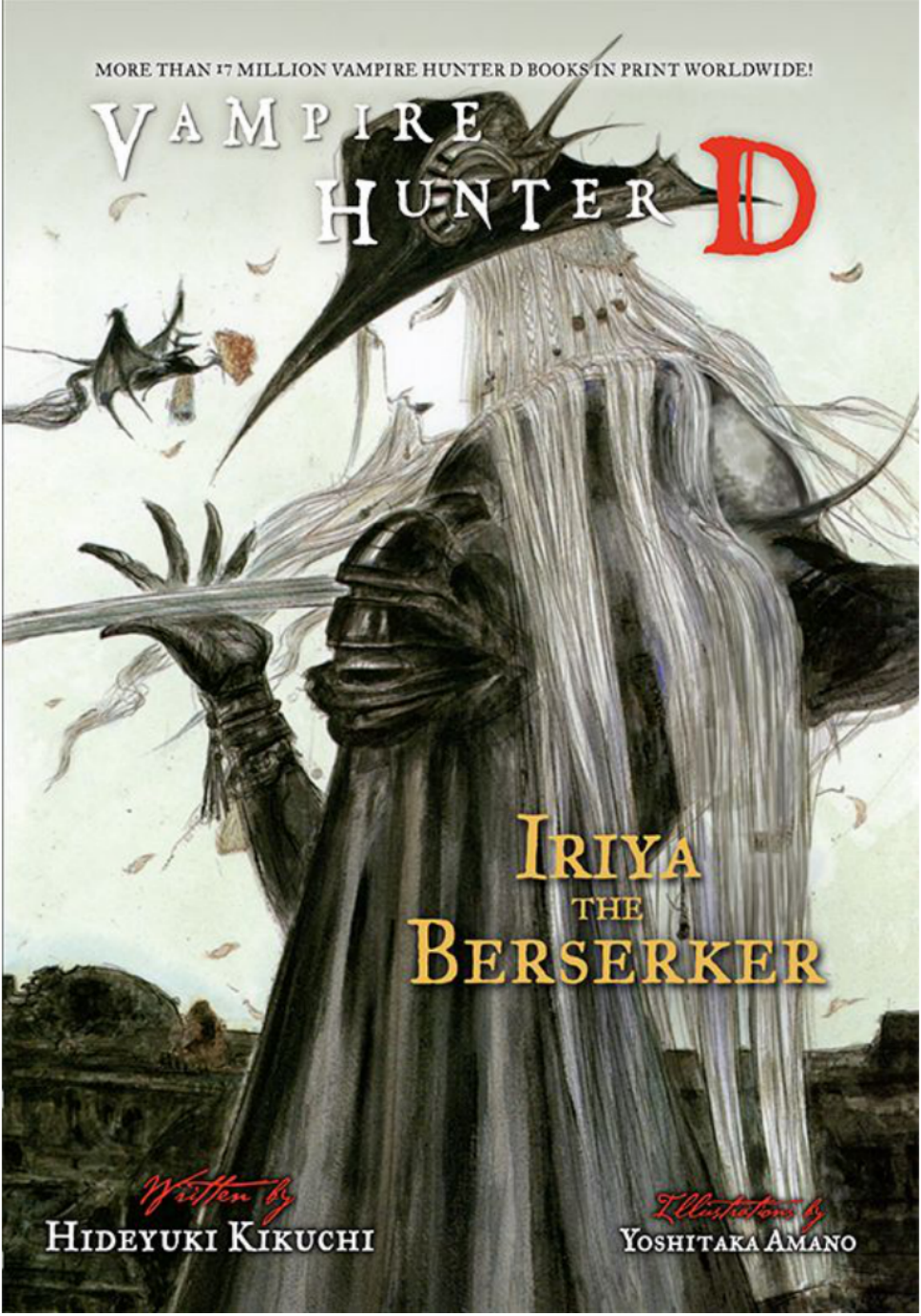
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VAMPIRE HUNTER D
IRIYA THE BERSERKER
Written by
HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI
Illustrations by
YOSHITAKA AMANO

VAMPIRE HUNTER D

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VAMPIRE HUNTER D

VOLUME 23

IRIYA THE BERSERKER

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English translation by

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VAMPIRE HUNTER D

Tri-ya the Berserker

Beautiful Swordswoman

chapter 1

I

Although the sun should've been high at that hour, a shadow seemed to hang over the world. No one recalled it now, but long ago in the Far East there had been a style of ink painting called *sumi-e*. When heavenly skill inspired its brushstrokes as it did now, the vermilion boles of the twisted forests adorning a portion of the wilderness and the mounds of rubble nearly hidden behind their wall, as well as the graves of marble and gold that towered at the end of a winding road that almost seemed paved with crystal—all seemed stained with black and gray chaos, sealed away in it and letting out an unvoiceable scream.

In the motionless world of this picture the rain alone continued to fall, and even that would eventually surrender the impression of movement. And of sound, as well. It was the time when grays gently gave way to blacks. There was some question as to whether anyone could tell the hour at a time like this.

It was at just such an hour that a challenger appeared. A shape spread like a black stain in the incessant rain, and accompanied by the ringing of iron-shod hooves on the crystal road, it became a rider with black raiment fluttering behind him as he galloped along astride a black cyborg horse. At that point, a sound entered the world. It wasn't a shriek of fear from the inky tones at a horse and rider who were like darkness coalesced, but rather a feverish sigh—spilled at the sight of the gorgeous, pale countenance that drifted amid black garb fluttering like the wings of a supernatural bird.

Pounding through the silken threads of rain, the horse and rider passed through a gate into a graveyard where marble and gold joined in designs convoluted and grotesque.

From the gate alone it was evident the cemetery belonged to the Nobility, and though its interior should've been guarded by an electronic brain produced by the same science that'd built interplanetary spacecraft, the place had been left utterly devastated—actually, it was the sort of tableau favored by second-rate artists in the Capital who knew nothing of the Frontier. Grave markers and statues of natural stone that'd been exploded and burned by people from surrounding villages were almost unrecognizable, while lettering of inlaid gold and precious-jewel ornamentation had been pried from grave markers of indestructible metal, which despite all the violence and destructive force they'd seen still presented a lustrous and unblemished exterior to the

storm. If the Nobles had so desired, they could've stopped even an army of humans numbering in the tens of thousands before it ever passed through the gates, so why they would allow trespassers to commit this destruction remained an eternal mystery.

The clan's graves lay to either side of the path. The truer their bloodline, the farther from the gate they were, and off in the distance was a great mausoleum that resembled a castle; the closer you came to it, the larger the mausoleums and gravestones became.

Before long the rider reached the end of the path, where he dismounted without the slightest hesitation, wound the reins easily around the trunk of a nearby tree, and set off on foot toward a massive door. His boots were silent in each footfall, and droplets of water fell without pause from the edge of his wide-brimmed traveler's hat. The rider appeared to be in the habit of wearing it tilted slightly to the right.

After staring at the name inscribed on the surface of the door, the rider spread the fingers of his left hand and put its palm against the door.

"Here it comes!" a hoarse voice informed him. The surprising thing was, the voice came from between the palm of his hand and the door that lay before him. "It's not the viscount, though. It's a grave keeper," the voice continued. "And a pretty tough one at that!"

The rider pulled his hand away.

It was at that very moment that the door swung open with a groan. The shadowy form that burst from it slashed a sword down at the rider's head, but it was deflected with a mellifluous sound, and when the shadow landed on a gravestone across the path it took on human shape. Every bit as tall as the rider, the young man was shrouded in a green cape. His left hand was held far out in front of him with fingers spread, while his right had a sword held as far back as he could reach. There was no opening in his defenses, nor would his deadly pose fail to exploit one in his opponent.

In response, the rider had his elegant longsword in one hand, extended at eye level with his foe. From the vicinity of his left hand, there escaped an almost impressed remark. "Oh, now this is—"

At the same time, the young man in green took a deep breath, his shoulders alone moving.

"—just too perfect," the hoarse voice continued.

Was that to say here was a life and a skill too perfect to be taken by the blow to follow?

The rider's sword gradually began to rise. His right arm moved slightly to the side, and when it halted he'd taken the famous stance of a swordsman holding his blade up beside his head like a baseball bat. Everyone knew that pose was an invitation. However, when it came from this rider, his beauty made his foes' recognition that they were gambling their lives lose shape like a heat shimmer, luring his

opponents in like moths to the flame. The grave keeper would be walking into a death trap.

The young man in green actually took a step forward. No, he advanced *two* paces. That he managed to stop there was a feat of incredible willpower. Squeezing the fingers of his extended hand into a fist, he spread them once more. It was almost as if he were going to claw at his foe rather than slash at him. He stood that way for a second—two seconds—

"Not bad," the hoarse voice said. "Borrowed that trick from the Nobility, did he? However—"

A different voice finished that sentence.

"Please, allow me to have this battle."

It was the voice of a woman. And a young one, at that.

But neither of the two figures moved an inch, and the thread of murderous intent that bound them didn't slacken in the least.

"Pol."

Like a demon hearing a litany of prayer, the young man jumped, making a broad sweep with his left hand. A footlong blade concealed in his sleeve zipped at the source of the voice.

"D," she said, beginning a new appeal, "I don't want any compensation at all. Once I've slain him, I'll be on my way. I only ask that you please let me have this fight."

The eyes of the rider—D—shifted ever so slightly to the side, catching sight of the speaker.

The blade the young grave keeper had hurled hung in the air. It had been caught an inch or two shy of the woman's eye by a crimson hand. From the elbows all the way to the backs and palms of her hands she was covered by dazzling armor. There in the silvery curtains of endless rain, she called to mind a burning flame given human form. A crimson cape was closed over the woman's chest, and her pale face was slightly downturned. Glowing red hair hung down to her waist, concealing the left half of her face. The clasp on her cape was a gold chain. Pieces of chain were also sewn here and there to her cape in no particular pattern, lending the worn and dirty fabric a certain charm.

"My name's Iriya. I'm a Hunter."

You could tell the prowess of a Hunter by the tone of their voice, the look in their eye, and the way they carried themselves. What did D make of her?

When he stepped forward without a word, Iriya played her final card, saying, "He's my younger brother."

D halted, his dark eyes reflecting her pale face before quickly shifting to the young man. "You get one minute," a voice of iron informed her.

"You have my thanks."

The woman's right hand slipped under her cape.

What weapon did she have, and how did she use it? All her

opponent's speculation on these accounts would be frustrated.

"Pol!" the woman called out again.

Blackness covered her face. The young man had shifted his left hand, which he still held outstretched. The shadow of his palm and five fingers covered the woman's face, robbing her of her sight. The eyes of the woman—Iriya—were locked in darkness. Not only that, but even the scenery around her darkened. D's black garb, the gravestones, the trees, and the reflected light were all lost, each and every one of them sinking into darkness.

"He's good," said a hoarse voice that no one would ever mistake for D's, though it certainly seemed to come from his location.

Ahead of the Hunter in a particularly dense patch of darkness there burned the sort of animosity that would make anyone want to turn their face away.

"My, my, my," the hoarse voice said snidely. "There are two presences. Only one of 'em is all fired up, though. And that darkness—it's special, absorbing all signs of people, sounds, even movements of the air! He could be standing right in front of you, and you'd never even know it till he stabbed you."

Even as it said that, the hoarse voice moved in a new direction—shifting a bit to the left.

"Nice!" the hoarse voice said.

At that moment, what had happened in the depths of that impenetrable darkness?

"It's over."

Before the hoarse voice could even say that, the surrounding darkness had started to retreat, as if it'd just remembered it didn't belong there. And in the twilit ruins D and the young grave keeper who'd been left a corpse came back into view, as well as the warrior woman who lingered by the body.

"Looks like someone might be dumb enough to shout for joy," the hoarse voice remarked with a ring of melancholy.

As the lovely woman looked down at the motionless form of her brother, there wasn't a hint of sadness about her.

"I suppose that's one way of winning. The wine from the victory cup must taste mighty bitter, though."

The beauty—Iriya—murmured something. Undoubtedly it was the words to a prayer. Once the corpse at her feet had turned to dust, Iriya returned her blade to its sheath. The almost imperceptible wind carried the dust away. Before long, only the young grave keeper's clothes remained there, and that was when Iriya came over to D. No tears had left their tracks on her pale visage.

"Thank you. With your cooperation, I was able to send my brother back to God."

Iriya shifted her eyes from D's face to his left hip. She'd heard the

hoarse voice pensively muttering, *To God, eh?*

"Do you believe in God?" D asked.

Iriya nodded. "If I didn't, I couldn't go on living."

Perhaps it wouldn't have mattered what she replied. The figure of beauty in black walked back the way he'd come without so much as a nod.

"The hair!" she called out to him.

When Nobles turned to dust, the only part they left behind was hair, and that was used to confirm their identity. The person who brought it in would be paid the reward, regardless of who they might be.

As she followed fast behind D, Iriya said, "This is for you, for letting me fight in your place. Please, take it."

"You're the one who did the work," D replied without halting.

"That won't sit quite right with me. Take it, please," Iriya continued doggedly.

Suddenly, D asked her, "And if I said no, what would you do?"

"What?"

"Would you resort to force?"

This young man wasn't one to distinguish between men and women when it came to armed opponents, but in this instance his actions were a little out of the ordinary.

Tension surged into Iriya's expression, and half of it still remained there as the beauty declared, "You're on."

At her carefree declaration, a cry of "Wow!" rose from the vicinity of D's left hip. His lips hadn't moved a bit.

"So," she continued, "how do we play this?"

Her expression calm and with a hint of what could be called daring, the warrior woman was ready to accept D's challenge.

II

The air whistled. But to be precise, just before that sound Iriya had leapt out of the sword's way.

As she jumped a good ten feet, Iriya hurled the dagger from her hip with an underhanded scooping motion. Her dagger, sheathed with its hilt pointed down, had split in two down the middle the instant it'd been pulled from its scabbard.

There was a beautiful sound. As she landed, Iriya pressed the palms of her hands together in front of her chest. The handle of the dagger jutted from between them. D had batted the dagger away with his blade, and Iriya had stopped it cold.

Just as Iriya was about to reach for the sword on her hip with her right hand, the figure in black sailed over her head. Was he an angel or the Grim Reaper? The only thing that was certain was that his beauty was unearthly. There wasn't so much as a hint of mercy in the stark glint slashing down at her. Iriya couldn't even draw her sword.

Sparks flew. Right in front of Iriya was a visage so gorgeous a good look at it seemed likely to leave her in a stupor, and D narrowed his eyes ever so slightly—and backed off. Her eardrums pounded with the sound made when she'd parried D's blade. The impact she'd felt through the dagger not only numbed her left arm from the wrist down, but the loss of feeling extended all the way up to the shoulder. Nevertheless, Iriya was reaching for the hilt of her sword with her right hand.

"That's far enough," the hoarse voice said. "Well, not bad for a woman. You made it through three of *this* guy's attacks. Outstanding."

After confirming that D had sheathed his blade, Iriya took her hand away from her own hilt. She'd judged from the air about D that he had no intention of attacking again. She didn't know what the result had been. Apparently this young man had the ability to erase all traces of even his ordinary presence the instant hostilities ceased. Was he a beautiful nothingness made solid? If he closed on someone while keeping his footfalls silent, they'd never notice till he'd run them through the heart.

"So, you'll accept it then, won't you?" Iriya asked, sweat rolling down her cheeks.

"Sure."

"Good," Iriya said with a carefree smile. "I'm sure my brother would be satisfied with his reward being paid to the world-renowned D. You have my thanks."

And then she walked over to the dusty remains of the grave keeper, bent down, and grabbed a handful of hair before straightening up again. Handing it to D, she went back to the remains, put her left fist over the right side of her chest, and took a prayerful pose. The almost nonexistent evening breeze tossed her hair and the hem of the blazing red cape.

Ordinarily, D focused solely on his own activities, regardless of who else might be there or what their situation might be. In this case, he had to deal the coup de grâce to the Noble who slumbered in that mausoleum. However, at some point the sense of incongruity that wafted about the warrior woman with whom he'd done battle had suspended that course of action.

Before long, the girl turned in D's direction. In the faint remaining light of day, the shadow of her hair stretched long and far across the ground. It no longer had the color of flame.

"The man they call D doesn't need any help, I suppose?" she said, her expression composed and no sign of tears anywhere.

After watching the figure in crimson walk off a short distance to where her cyborg horse waited, D turned toward the grave. A faint groan had reached his ears.

"Oh, it seems that rascal the viscount knows what we've got in store for him! He's moaning about how he doesn't want to die. Shouting at us

to stay back."

As the figure in black walked forward, the voice from the vicinity of his left hip continued. "But what I don't get is that girl. She's got the skill of a Hunter for sure, but what's with her acting so cool and collected? That was her own brother she cut down! And she didn't shed a single tear over him. Still, she doesn't look cold blooded. The way she acted toward you, it was like she was just a plain ol' farm girl dressed up for a costume party. Don't see a lot of that type these days."

"She gained something," D fairly muttered. "She must've, for an ordinary girl to become a Hunter. But in exchange—"

"She must've lost something, too, right?" the hoarse voice said, finishing the Hunter's thought. "What that something was—does that interest you?"

D didn't answer. If a million people knew him, every last one of them probably would reply that he had no interest at all in that topic. And they'd assert in unison that he'd never say so.

Passing through the entrance to the burial place, D vanished. Groans became sobs of fear, then the breathless huffing of the terrorized. And then—the screams of someone in their death throes.

Five days later, D was in Silver Strings Town. He was there to turn over a sample of the Noble's DNA to the local sheriff and to collect the reward.

"Nice little payday for you, isn't it?" the sheriff said venomously as D stuffed a thick wad of bills into his coat.

"We can trade places if you'd like."

The sheriff shuddered, saying, "Don't even joke about that. I'm happy just being the law in a hick town. They don't pay me enough to take on the Nobility. It's just—" He seemed to grow reflective, rubbing one arm before he continued. "I never thought I'd meet someone so good looking it made my hair stand on end. We've got hot springs here in town. What say you go have yourself a soak?"

"That's real neighborly of you."

The Hunter's voice had changed so radically the sheriff could only stand rooted and amazed as the young man in black walked toward the door.

"Between you and the woman who came in yesterday, I'd say Hunters these days are a pretty odd bunch."

"A woman?" the hoarse voice inquired.

"Yep. Only she wasn't cashing in on no Noble. It was a pair of thugs who'd jumped her. After putting 'em down, she finds out they're outlaws with prices on their heads, you see. But that woman—actually, *girl's* more like it—she really doesn't look like the kind to be working as a Hunter. Sure is pretty, but she just seems like the kind of average folk you'd run into anywhere, and—"

"What's her name?" the Hunter asked as he stood in the doorway, his back still to the lawman.

Knitting his brow a bit, the sheriff shortly replied, "I'm pretty sure it was Iriya. Say, are you a ventriloquist or something?"

Giving no reply, the Hunter stepped outside, where the hoarse voice from the vicinity of his left hip said, "Strange connection we've got here. Imagine meeting her here, of all places."

"Does that interest you?" D asked in his own voice.

The hoarse voice cleared its throat, replying in a not-on-your-life tone, "Well, putting that aside for the time being, the sheriff did say something about a hot spring, didn't he? Seems the waters have all kinds of stuff that does a body good. So long as it's not running water, you should probably suck it up and give it a try. What do you say we go for a dip?"

D's cyborg horse was tethered to a fence on the opposite side of the street. As he was crossing it, a trio of men coming from his left brushed past him.

"Hey!" the leftmost man shouted menacingly. "The corner of your coat hit me! Ain't you got nothing to say about that?"

“Sorry, pal,” said a hoarse voice that didn’t sound like it belonged to the Hunter at all, but there was no mistaking the utter contempt in its tone.

“Are you screwing with us, you bastard?” the same man shouted, and all three of them surrounded D.

“Hey, mister—you don’t mind *this*, do you?” another said as he reached for D’s chest.

A heartbeat later the man’s wrist broke noisily, and as he was flipped over, his elbow shattered. Since he hit the ground headfirst, he suffered a horrendous concussion as well as having a cervical vertebra dislocated.

The expressions of the other two changed, and as they shouted curses and reached for the swords on their hips, the hoarse voice said simply, “You’re gonna die,” and froze them on the spot.

The hot spring in question, which lay on the east end of town, was shrouded in steam. Thanks to the patrons of the hot springs who came from other regions on hearing its praises, as well as to the money those people spent there, Silver Strings Town enjoyed a high standard of living that was rare in the Frontier sectors. Many paid for admission to the baths with goods such as colossal vegetables or synthesized beef, to the point where those running the establishments had to hire wagons six times a year to haul the bounty off to the food distribution center.

The springs were divided into a total of thirty-six different therapeutic baths, large and small: the public baths, the more curative medicinal baths, and the healing baths, where you could see the effects firsthand. The medicinal baths were three times as expensive as the public ones, while the healing baths cost ten times as much.

Some establishments had a common entrance for all three kinds of bath, while others kept separate entrances, and in early afternoon, while the sun was still high, the girl rode her cyborg horse to the healing baths. The carriages, cars, and wheelchairs of the seriously injured or the infirm usually were lined up at the exclusive entrance regardless of the cost, but today carriages were few and far between, so the girl didn’t have to wait before paying twice the healing baths’ normal fee to the staff who eyed her crimson garb with wonder, and then requesting a private bathing area.

The path of stones and concrete was covered with droplets of condensation. Light spilling in through windows nearly thirty feet up cast dappled patterns on the floor. The girl’s feet marched right through them.

Iron doors came into view, set into the wall to either side of her. Occurring at intervals of about thirty feet, they stretched on seemingly forever. The receptionist had given the girl number 49.

It took her seven minutes to reach the door with that number plate. Turning a brass knob, she heard the sound of the lock disengaging. A changing room that looked to be ten paces square appeared before her. The private hot spring the girl had requested was actually one intended for multiple occupants. She probably wanted ample space to relax alone.

Placing the last of her clothes into a cubbyhole in the wall, the girl slid open a glass door and entered the bathing area.

The vast bathing area was easily twice as large as the changing room, a rustic-looking place where natural black stone had been dissolved and mixed with concrete before being sprayed on the walls and floors, while steam and pools of milky-white therapeutic waters filled the room.

The girl was stark naked, carrying not so much as a hand towel. Without even a dagger for defense, her unguarded and glorious nakedness made her look like an ordinary hot spring patron instead of suggesting any connection to her line of work.

The bath was divided into a number of pools, each with a sign posted on the wall:

Internal ailments: 3–5 dips of 5 minutes each. Drink no more than1 teaspoon.

External injuries and skin conditions: 5 minutes or less.

External injuries and muscular problems: 10 minutes or less.

External injuries and internal-organ problems: 5 minutes or less.

External injuries and skeletal problems: 2 minutes or less.

The girl selected “muscular problems” and immersed herself in the warm water. According to the sign’s brief description, the waters treated not only muscle aches, but also cuts and scrapes. The posted limit of ten minutes was how long it should take for a completerecovery, and at the same time the sign stated that it would be dangerous to stay in the bath beyond that point.

With her eyes closed, her face took on an expression just as peaceful as that of any other hot spring patron.

Before two minutes had passed, the glass door slid open and dark figures charged in, plowing through the white steam with an air of murderous intent. Four men gazed down at the pool.

The girl opened her eyes, took a look at their vicious scowls, and quickly closed them again. Her expression had become one ofterrible boredom.

“And what might I be able to do for you?”

Her greeting was so reasonable—and in this case, entirelyunexpected—that the men fell silent for a moment and exchanged glances before their lips twisted into grins.

A rough-looking giant of a man who had to be their leader said,

“Sorry to barge in on you during your bath, though it’s doing wonders for our eyes!” Licking his lips, he continued, “And for our wallets, too. We’d love to drag you outta there and really stick it to you, but we were hired to take you down right where you are. You can soak there in your own blood!”

III

All of the men had weapons. When the leader tossed his chin, the man to his right tightened his grip on a short spear. The others remained empty handed, either out of complete confidence in the skill of the first man, or because their target—Iriya—looked like nothing more than an ordinary girl scared out of her wits.

In the bath, Iriya pushed off with her hands and feet, retreating to the far end of the little pool. Perhaps that only stoked his bullying nature, because the face of the man with the spear was warped by naked lust as he gripped the weapon as if it were a harpoon. He intended to throw it and finish her off.

But a stunned look spread across his face. Iriya’s head had unexpectedly arched back, and she’d submerged in the warm water. The milky-white bathwater didn’t allow the killers so much as a blurry glimpse of her form.

“Damn it!” the man groaned, and the spear left his hands. Although he’d made a diagonal thrust toward where he believed the girl’s chest to be, his spear had touched nothing.

“That bitch!”

Drawing the machete from his hip, the spearman leapt into the bath. The water was only thigh deep. As he kicked his way through the water willy-nilly, to his rear the leader called out to him, “Watch yourself!”

At that instant, the spear was thrust up from below the man, its head piercing him through the pit of his stomach and poking clear out through his back. His death rattle was like the cry of a wild animal.

Though staggering, the man didn’t fall, but rather grabbed hold of the spear and pulled it free, throwing both it and the machete he held down at his compatriots’ feet before smiling broadly and collapsing through a mountain of steam. The bathwater that splashed up was stained red.

“She ain’t got a weapon!” the leader shouted. “But don’t go in there. We wait till she comes up. She’ll be outta breath soon enough. You—bow!”

The man he’d addressed already had his bowstring taut, and he let his arrow fly at the water’s surface. The other two had longswords drawn. They’d seen that what looked to be an ordinary girl was the exact opposite.

Five seconds . . . Ten . . . Twenty . . . The time that slipped past felt both long and short to those gambling their lives.

“Any second now,” the leader groaned, and at that moment two things happened simultaneously. There was the sound of the bathwater churning, which made the men stand ready, and the sound of the glass door sliding open.

“Go!” the leader bellowed, pushing the compatriots who flanked him toward the bath before he turned around.

The approaching figure in black was so gorgeous, the very steam that clung to him seemed to glow.

“You ain’t Nazlo—who *are* you?”

Both the voice that shouted those words and the sword the man held ready trembled at the unearthly air of the approaching figure. The leader didn’t seem to notice when terrific screams echoed from the direction of the bath.

“We want to hear about Viscount Kraken—so leave one alive.”

All the leader heard were those frank but disturbing words. No matter whom it was he now faced, the fact that this person knew the viscount’s name meant that he definitely needed to meet his end.

Bracing his broadsword by his hip, the leader shouted, “Kill ’im!” and charged toward the figure, wildly waving his steel all the while.

There were three of them, and they were certain their blades fell on the figure first, yet to their great frustration they slashed only empty space. A flash of light shot out between them—and two heads sailed through the air. The vivid vermilion stains didn’t spread through the steam and across the floor until after the pair of heads had sunk into the waters of a distant bath.

Still gripping his sword, the leader was rooted between the two corpses. While the sword tip in front of his chest had been thrust at him with ungodly speed, it was the beauty before him that robbed him of his soul—the beauty of a youthful face, with a traveler’s hat down low over the eyes.

“D!”

Though the young man heard that cry from the bath, he didn’t turn in its direction. Rather, it was the leader who reacted.

“D . . .” he muttered like a demented soul, sinking as his legs turned to jelly.

He knew the name D. The knowledge was gleaned from rumors ghastly enough to take the legs right out from under the man.

“You saved me,” the girl said. “But what are you doing here?”

“I just finished mopping up three hoods, and when they were begging for their lives, an interesting name came up,” the hoarse voice said from the vicinity of D’s left hip. “Anyway, the idle chitchat will keep till later. You sure are stacked, aren’t you?”

“*What?*” she cried, and there was the sound of something slapped over flesh and an intense feeling of misgivings.

“And here you thought I couldn’t see you through all this steam? In

your dreams! But I don't suppose you feel much like soaking in bloodied bathwater. Hurry up and get some clothes on. Don't worry, I'll keep my eyes shut, and *this guy* doesn't have a shred of interest in naked ladies."

"You sure you won't look?"

"Of course. You have my word as a gentleman."

Even when there was the sound of wet feet stepping out of the bath and pattering right past him, D made no attempt to turn.

"Where's Viscount Kraken?" he inquired.

The tip of his sword was right under the nose of the slumped leader.

"I don't know . . . Who are you talking about?"

"The Noble who ordered the lot of you to kill that girl just now."

The Hunter's voice had suddenly turned hoarse. The leader's eyes bugged out.

"Did you leave three of your flunkies behind and collect some new help on account of you'd heard how tough she was? But when just a few of you went into the ladies' bath for a peek, you were jumping the gun. What—did you think because she was a woman it'd be easy? No matter, when you're out looking for help, you might want to choose people who watch what they say. Of course, *they* aren't saying anything anymore."

The leader's face went white as a sheet. He realized what had happened to the three men he'd sent to town.

"See, just before their heads flew, they said you were the only one who knew where to find Viscount Kraken. Well, I suppose it was better than having an arm and a leg hacked off."

"I don't know . . . I don't know nothing . . ." the leader said, shaking his head. It wobbled from side to side as if he were drunk. Perhaps the scent of death had left his spirit besotted.

There was no sound as the Hunter's blade glinted. It only appeared to be a single flash of steel, yet both the leader's ears went flying. Squealing, he pressed the palms of his hands to the sides of his head, and from beneath them thick redness spilled.

"I'll lop off your left arm next."

The hoarse voice's dispassionate announcement turned the leader's body to cold stone. Nevertheless, he continued to say he didn't know anything.

"I guess it's no use, then. He'd rather die than talk. Time to chalk up another pointless death and pull out of here?"

Once again, the hoarse voice turned the leader into a corpse.

"Please, wait!" a voice called from behind the Hunter. Now dressed, Iriya ran over to stand beside D. "It was me Viscount Kraken was gunning for, right?" she said. "Good—that means Chulos must be there after all!"

D's eyes slowly bored into Iriya's face.

"You said 'there,' didn't you? You know where he is?"

"Kraken's castle and grave both moved two thousand years ago. Now

he has a wandering fortress that prowls the water's edge out on the Frontier."

The fact that both these voices apparently belonged to D left Iriya's head spinning.

"I heard something in the town of Semdonen from a traveling merchant. He said that when he'd passed through Daskankirul Gorge, in an area that'd only been hydrogen sulfide swamps before, he'd seen a gigantic, towering structure that looked like some kind of Noble's castle. He saw that six months ago, and I heard it from him a month back."

"Sad to say, but if you're talking about Daskankirul, I passed through there on the way here. There was nothing there," the hoarse voice said with regret, and then it said to the leader, "Hey, are you gonna come clean with us or what?"

The leader turned away in a snit.

D's eyes gleamed. In them, the leader's body grew thin, as if he'd been wrung dry. That's what happened to humans who felt the approach of death.

"Please, wait," Iriya said to stop him.

"You feeling pity, missy?" the hoarse voice asked teasingly.

"No."

Circling around behind the leader, Iriya grabbed both his shoulders. Planting her knee in the center of his back, she pushed with it at the same time she pulled against his shoulders. The leader let out a deep breath.

"Now you'll be able to fight, okay?"

The leader's expression instantly became one of relief—and of surprise. Looking back over his shoulder at Iriya, he said, "You're strange for a Hunter, you know that? I don't mean to talk out of turn, but you should get outta that line and do something upstanding. You'll make someone a real good bride. And for the record, Kraken's castle has moved to Wendover Gorge now."

Iriya's mouth dropped open. Putting her fist over it, she said, "Thank you."

The leader stood up. He was no longer trembling. When he raised his broadsword high and dashed straight for D, Iriya shut her eyes.

Hunter

chapter 2

I

Some bath that turned out to be!" the hoarse voice said as the Hunter's steed started to trot away with the girl riding by his side. The voice seemed to issue from the vicinity of his left hand, which gripped the reins.

When D had mounted up to ride off, Iriya had chased after him. They were on a road less than a hundred yards from the hot spring baths. To inform the spa staff of the tragic turn of events that'd taken place there, Iriya gave them a note recounting the incident and a lock of her hair. DNA analysis of the latter would confirm her identity as a registered Hunter. At the next town she'd appear before the local sheriff, where she'd have to answer some questions, but if the identities of the characters she'd dispatched had been discovered, a little money under the table would see her acquitted of any charges.

"There's no way around it. Work is work, after all."

"So, you don't intend to give up, then?" the hoarse voice asked.

"No."

"You heard what *this* guy said. And I agree with him. I mean, like, a hundred percent."

Iriya snorted. Apparently she'd realized the true nature of the hoarse voice. "Is that some sort of parasite?" she asked.

"I suppose it is," D said in an uncharacteristic reply.

There weren't all that many human beings around playing host to parasitic creatures. They sacrificed some of their blood, their energy, or in extremely rare cases their life itself, and in return they gained the abilities of the parasite. Through this hazardous form of give-and-take, a host could gain strength beyond that of normal men or take on special jobs, such as being a Hunter.

"Could I have a look at it?" Iriya asked, reaching for D's left hand as she edged her cyborg horse closer.

"I wouldn't do that," D said. "It'll just make you ill."

"What are you talking about? You can touch me, missy. I'm fine with you rubbing me against your cheek, if you like. Or stuff me down between those bouncy, bouncy fun bags and—ouff!"

D gave his left fist another squeeze, then adjusted his grip on the reins.

For a while, the silence continued.

After about ten minutes had passed, Iriya ventured, "Say—"

She found no purchase there. No reply came from the gorgeous profile of the Hunter swaying in the saddle.

"Are you going to Wendover Gorge?"

"Well, it's on our way."

She didn't even mind that it was the hoarse voice that replied. High in the saddle, Iriya clapped her hands together.

"What are you so happy about?" D inquired.

"That I can go with you. Traveling alone is so boring!"

"I don't think it's gonna be a very fun trip," the hoarse voice remarked.

Iriya shrugged her shoulders a bit. It seemed like just the sort of thing any girl her age would do. It wasn't the gesture of a person accustomed to taking lives.

"You think so? I suppose not. There's no sense in moping about it, though. There's still a good distance to go."

"Been at this long?"

As her eyes shot to D, they seemed to say, *Well, what do you know!* It was a wonder that this young man should be curious about her.

Eyeing her suspiciously, he asked, "What is it?"

"Er, nothing. Let's see—it's only been three years. I've been on the road since I was fourteen."

"*Only?*" D's left hand murmured.

"And the two of you—you've been at this even longer?"

"You could say that," D replied. And that was all there was to it.

After waiting a little while, Iriya seemed to reproach herself as she said, "Stupid. Here I was expecting more."

"How so?" the hoarse voice inquired.

Looking a bit vexed, Iriya continued, "I just thought the great Hunter D would have all sorts of things to say to me. After all, he's so mysterious."

"Nobility Hunters are all that way, aren't they? You wouldn't really call this any sort of job for upstanding folks."

"Well, I suppose you have a point."

There was an iron rule for survival in this world, and every living creature knew it by heart: *Humans are not on a par with Nobles.* The only exceptions to that immutable philosophy were the men and women they called Hunters. They were highly skilled in combat, possessing the kind of unbreakable spirit, stamina, and recuperative abilities that were found in perhaps only one person in ten million. These huntsmen and huntresses felt none of the fear the Nobles had sown down through the millennia—they were the only ones who dared gainsay the iron rule.

As a result, Hunters were largely deficient in things other humans possessed. Since the violence, evil, and misanthropy they encountered in their daily lives left them unable to adapt to society, Hunters were kept at a distance by other people and also chose to keep their distance from

others. So Hunters had no choice but to be nomads. With no spouses or children or settled family lives, their search for Nobles left them roaming the Frontier in an ambivalent existence in which they lived only to destroy the Nobility but couldn't make a living without them. Often others didn't know their real names or where they were from, and since Hunters didn't talk about themselves, they often became legends of the Frontier.

"There are exceptions. But I wouldn't call the exceptions all that exceptional."

The hoarse voice's remark made Iriya lean closer.

"Like who?"

"You."

"Huh?"

"You look to be a far cry from a Hunter. It's not just that you don't seem suited to it, but I'm surprised the last three years didn't see you dead a couple thousand times over. And yet, I'll give you credit for having more skill than the average Hunter. And your resolve—"

The hoarse voice drew a breath. Its next words seemed to probe. "You destroy your own brother, and the very next day you're going about your business as cool as a cucumber, ready to kill the next member of your—gaaaah!"

D took his balled fist away from the reins and gave it a few shakes. A cry of pain echoed from it each time.

"Don't let it bother you," D said. Coming from him, those words were practically a miracle.

Stretching her back in the saddle, Iriya let out a deep breath. Though her eyes were shut, there was no sign of tears. Her pained expression quickly left her, becoming a smile. There was still sadness in it, but it was a great improvement.

The pair of cyborg horses hit the main road and headed southwest.

It was quite some time before the girl could wring the next words from her lips. "How long has it been—that you've been on the road, I mean?"

"I don't recall," D replied.

"So you've been out here ever since you became a Hunter?"

"That's right."

"And Nobles—how many of them have you killed?"

"I don't recall."

His icy reply silenced Iriya. Then, she said, "Yeah. That sounds like it'd be for the best. Just forget everything."

It seemed as if she were giving that advice to herself.

Sunlight bleached the road. It was nearly noon, and there was not a single gap or crevice in which to shelter from the light—it was the human race's time. Travelers going the opposite way passed them from time to time, and while each and every one of them became enraptured,

there was no denying that some also showed astonishment. While the gorgeous young man with an unearthly air about him and the young woman in the crimson cape seemed to be in the same line of work, the different moods surrounding each made it seem unlikely that they were even the same species.

Iriya only opened her mouth again when D put his hand to the brim of his traveler's hat and angled it down.

"Is the light of the sun a problem for dhampirs?"

That was hardly the sort of basic question one would expect from a Hunter, but Iriya didn't miss the way it made D's cheeks go slightly slack.

"Yeah, I thought as much. In that case, why are you traveling by day? It'd be much easier to ride by night, wouldn't it?"

Iriya caught D's eyes shooting in her direction for a second. In that instant, she was frozen to the marrow of her bones. That was how the young man had succeeded in slaying Nobles for so long.

Immediately shifting his eyes forward again, D said, "People who've lost something become Hunters—only those who've lost something that can never be replaced. People like me, or you." His low voice carried no emotion. It rang like iron.

Iriya zinged her reply right back at him. She was overjoyed that D recognized her as a colleague.

"What's lost might not be coming back, but we can get new things. That's what I think. You might not deal with the daylight so well, but I've heard that by night you're invincible, and any wounds you get heal right away. That's something new right there! I think it's great."

After allowing some silence, D, miraculously, spoke again to the naive girl staring at him. "What did you lose, and what did you gain?"

That question drew an odd reaction. Iriya's eyes fixed on a point in thin air. She didn't appear to have the least intention of replying to D's question. It looked as though she'd suddenly slipped into a state of dementia.

"I—didn't lose . . . didn't lose anything . . . not a single thing . . ."

It was only after those words that a spark of consciousness returned to her eyes.

"Alucard . . ."

Returning to her senses, she gasped and shut her mouth.

"Uh, what I said just now—"

"You mean, 'Alucard'?" D said in a low voice.

"Oh, damn. Please—just forget that."

He didn't so much as glance at the flustered Iriya, nor did he say another word, and Iriya laid a steadying hand over her own heart.

Just then, heaven and earth dimmed without warning.

"We're in for rain!" Iriya said, and when she looked up apprehensively, the formerly blue sky was nowhere to be seen. They saw

stark flashes at the edge of their vision. “Lightning on the plains? That must be—”

Her countenance utterly drained of color.

“It’s the Lightning Thicket of the Gods,” the hoarse voice told her with delight, speaking for the first time in quite a while. “Long ago there was an army of giants produced by the Nobility that rebelled against their creators, and somewhere hereabouts was the battlefield where the two sides clashed in final combat. They say the fighting went on for a whole month without respite. In all the history of the Nobility, the only other external threat they spent longer fighting was the alien invaders about two thousand years ago.”

Threads of white rained down while the voice spoke. And up ahead —where blue spread at the distant horizon—this time, unmistakably, there was lightning to be seen.

“Some say the lightning comes from an assault satellite up in orbit; others claim it’s a weaponized weather front. Whatever the case, once every seven days lightning runs between the ground and the sky, covering the plains like a forest. Just our luck to run into it.”

Looking at D, Iriya said, “My cloak is equipped to protect me from electrocution—how about your coat?”

The hoarse voice blurted out, “Sadly, no.”

“What’ll you do, then?”

Light swelled in the distance. Heaven and earth trembled. A roar that seemed to rock the world on its axis bore down on them.

The girl didn’t know what to say.

“That cape can’t protect you,” D said. “The giants were over thirty feet tall and armored in four inches of high-density steel, but it seems a single strike was able to kill them instantly.”

At a loss for words, Iriya touched the hem of her cape as she realized it couldn’t begin to compare to the giants’ armor.

“What are we going to do?”

“There’s a shelter constructed by the Nobility. Let’s go!”

“Where?”

“Try to keep up,” the hoarse voice told her irritably.

D cracked the reins, and his cyborg steed galloped forward in a cloud of dust.

Iriya couldn’t believe her eyes. Dark clouds eddied, the heavens issued the unsettling roar of thunder—and that was exactly the direction in which they were headed. Was he out of his mind?

“Just a second—isn’t that—are we—” Flustered as she was in the saddle, Iriya realized she had only one option. “What else can I do? Here goes nothing!”

Giving the flanks of her steed a kick, she started off in wild pursuit of the Hunter.

Pale streaks flashed to either side of them, and the ionized air

prickled her skin. Numbness sank its slender fangs into the marrow of her bones. Though the lightning still looked to be almost a mile off, she could feel it keenly. Never mind a direct hit—a strike in their general vicinity would leave them burned to a crisp.

Iriya shuddered.

D galloped along fifty yards ahead of her. It was all she could do to stay on his tail.

Suddenly the ground to her left rose up. Mashing aside a mantle of black earth, an enormous creature appeared. It was less than a hundred feet away. As its shovel-like feet pawed at the air, the beast was struck on its round head by a bolt of lightning. Iriya could hear its death throes behind her. Just as she thought of how she'd probably be next, a flash of lightning put a dome-shaped form ahead of D into stark relief.

"That's it!"

Hope vaulted over her fears, and Iriya mercilessly goaded her horse on. As she drew closer, she saw the same dome the light had picked out was over sixty feet in diameter. D had already dismounted, and leaving his steed where it was, he headed toward what looked to be the entrance.

When she halted her own horse, Iriya heard a scream. It was the cry of a man—or rather, a boy. Swiftly dismounting, she gave her horse a slap on the ass to drive it off, then followed D. Following the line of the dome for about thirty feet, she turned right and found him standing there. As Iriya blinked her eyes, another streak of lightning stitched together sky and ground, and the boy in front of D screamed again.

"Let's get inside—quick!" Iriya urged D.

D crossed to the boy's right and pressed his left hand to a red depression on the dome's surface.

"Ah!" the boy exclaimed as he started to fall backward, but D wrapped his arms around him and immediately entered the dome through the door that'd suddenly appeared. Once Iriya had followed suit, D pressed the same hand to an identical depression on the inside, and the entrance closed. At the same time, all of them became tinged with blue from head to toe. The boy clung to D's arm. He was scared to death.

He wore a jacket, shorts, and thick-soled walking shoes—the typical gear of someone from a family of moderate means on a journey. Likewise, the shoulder bag slung across his left shoulder was standard traveling equipment. While it didn't seem conceivable he was on his own, he also didn't seem to be lost. Neither D nor Iriya had seen any travelers who seemed to have misplaced a child. Had his parents gone too far before noticing his absence, or was it as yet unnoticed?

"Relax, kid," the hoarse voice said. "It's just a sterilizing light. The Nobility might be immortal, but when their human servants were with 'em, they couldn't have 'em tracking in dangerous germs from outside. See, the Nobles did show some consideration for humans."

After three seconds, the light faded and a door opened before them. The trio was greeted by a room so gorgeously appointed it would've made even the most jaded traveler cry out with delight. The shelters of the Nobility lacked none of their accustomed luxury.

As the boy stood dumbfounded in the white light, the girl coaxed him into taking a seat on the blue sofa, telling him, "I'll have some tea ready in no time. In the meantime, I'm Iriya. What's your name?"

"Meeker."

It was probably thanks to Iriya that his voice sounded a little more composed, though his expression was still stiff and his cheeks trembled. Given that he looked to be only seven or eight years old, it was no surprise that an abode of the Nobility on a lightning-covered plain would inspire more terror than curiosity.

"You did great on your own. What a good boy you are! Did you get separated from your parents?"

He swung his head from side to side.

"What happened, then?"

"I was with Nadja," he said suddenly, in a hazy tone. Tears welled in

his eyes. “We came this far—then she ran off and left me.”

“Ran off?”

“She was supposed to take me to my uncle’s place in a town called McCrory, but she told me she was just taking the money and left me here. What am I supposed to do on my own?”

With this disclosure, his slight shoulders started to quake as if from a fit, and he hiccupped a few times. He only stopped talking when Iriya gently put her arms around his small form.

“It’s okay. You’re not all alone. No one in this world is. Everybody has somebody. It so happens McCrory is on our way, and I’ll see that you get there . . . D, could I take a shower?”

“Sure, but there’s no running water,” the hoarse voice replied. “Running water’s taboo for Nobles. As a result, the shower’s like what we got earlier. I hear if a human stands naked in it, it feels about the same as if they’d soaked in warm water. Though I doubt the Nobility would’ve gone to all that trouble.”

“It doesn’t matter either way—will you hop in with me?”

The boy nodded.

D got up, put his hand against a depression on a wall to the left, and once again a door opened—or rather, sprang into existence.

“Not surprisingly, no one but a Noble can make use of the amenities,” said the Hunter. “There’s no bathtub for humans. Food,however, is a different matter.”

“That’s great. As soon as I’ve had my shower, I’ll fix something up. And then we’ll have time to hear your tale at length.”

The boy nodded heartily at Iriya’s words.

The Nobility’s shelter was stocked with a sumptuous array of foods suitable for humans.

“Say what you will, but the Nobility didn’t cheap out on this, did they?”

On tasting the roast duck, which was on a par with the highest quality prepared by the very best of chefs, both Iriya and the boy were astounded.

“Making all this appear, dishes and all, with one flick of a switch—the Nobles really were incredible, weren’t they? These plates are made of gold!”

Once the meal was finished, Iriya began to ask the boy—Meeker—about his circumstances.

He had lived with his father in a fishing community called Coeverlan, but about six months earlier his father had died in a manufactured tornado, leaving the housekeeper, Nadja, to bring him to his uncle in McCrory. Once they’d come this far, however, Nadja had said, “I’ve had enough of this!” and nothing more, leaving the boy with

only enough money to reach McCrory and taking off with the rest of it, according to him.

"She's a backstabber. We always took care of her at home, but she left me high and dry here. I'll get her for that. Once I'm bigger, I'll find her and shove her around—just you wait and see."

"Good thing he only wants to shove her around," the hoarse voice chuckled.

With a dubious expression, Meeker looked around and asked, "Is there an old man in here with us?"

Iriya clapped her hands together as if she'd just thought of something, then took the boy's face with both hands and turned it in D's direction, saying, "Our friend over there is the culprit—he knows ventriloquism!"

After a moment of bewilderment, the boy gave a nod. The tension faded from his features. In his little head, a minor mystery had been solved.

As if to escape the gaze of intent curiosity trained upon him, D went to the wall and held out his left hand. The wall became a window.

The world was sealed in darkness. Eyes trained on its depths, the gorgeous and motionless young man looked as if he were pursuing some eternally elusive truth, like a statue that would muse until the end of time. Who could express how vain it was?

As Iriya watched him in silence, she heard a faint yawn beside her.

"Good night. Sleeping quarters for humans are at the end of the hall."

Meeker got out of his chair and went over to the door. "Carp," he said, raising one hand. Most likely that was a farewell phrase from his hometown.

Though Coeverlan was a fishing community, it wasn't one of those seaside villages that always smelled of the tides. It was located in the lake region that spread across the northwest section of the Frontier. There they caught freshwater fish that rivaled those of the sea in their quantity, variety, strangeness, and danger. Meeker's family probably also ventured out onto the lake in ships, selling the fish they caught in the Capital or in nearby cities and towns.

"Carp," Iriya replied, and as soon as she'd spoken, the diminutive form disappeared through the doorway, and the door shut.

After a spell of silence, Iriya said, "Would you mind if I talked about myself?"

"Where the hell is this going?" the hoarse voice said, its remark directed at D.

"Suit yourself. It doesn't matter either way to me."

D's reply was directed at Iriya.

"It's kind of strange. I can't believe it . . . This is the first time I've felt like doing this. Maybe it's because you're the one they call D?"

Outside the window, the world was bleached white. The lightning burned itself into Iriya's eyes.

"You had a kid brother, didn't you?" the hoarse voice inquired. Although it was swiftly silenced with a cry, Iriya's far-off gaze never left D as she continued to spin her tale.

Her life, she said, could be divided into everything before age nine and everything after. Into heaven and hell. Her father, the huntsman; her mother, the housekeeper; her older brothers, Yan and Shezk; her older sister, Gia; her younger brothers, Pol and Chulos; and her younger sister, Maggie—nine of them all told had lived in the village of Paccilin in a valley in the eastern Frontier, where they passed their days together in peaceful poverty. Shadows were stronger than light in the valley, and the wind that blustered across the cold surface of the river glittered with white. There, in a house on the outskirts of the village, her mother awaited her father's return, baking heavenly sweetened bread from her rations of flour and sugar. Iriya's three brothers were charged with butchering the game her father took. The oldest boy kept aside the most nutritious parts for their parents, but he always saw to it that the littlest ones got the tastiest cuts of meat.

There was one thing the whole family looked forward to on summer evenings: Gia would sing traditional Frontier songs to the accompaniment of Shezk's guitar. Villagers who'd heard about this would come too, and before long they were asked to give a performance in the village square, after which a man in the audience suggested they perform in the Capital. He was a researcher from the Capital collecting information on Frontier songs. Gia was open to the idea, but Shezk wished to remain at home. Gia left home that fall, at the age of fifteen. It was about two weeks later that they received word that her party had been attacked by bandits on the way to the Capital. The fiery attack had reduced the carriage to ashes. Iriya believed it was that event that gave rise to her parents' silence.

And then one day in late autumn, when all the gorgeously colored trees stood against the shadows and the night was filled with the golden scents of the aging kegs of plum and apple spirits in the basement, *they* had come.

"They were dressed in pitch black . . . They knocked at our door. . . I thought, *Who could it be this late at night? . . .*"

Iriya's voice began to crack, and she stopped.

"And then . . ."

There was a short pause.

"And then . . ."

D remained looking out the window.

"And then . . ."

Lightning flashed once more beyond the window. It was followed by the next sound from Iriya—a scream. There was something in it that was

enough to make even D turn around. His right hand went for his longsword.

III

That awful scream seemed to trail on forever. Both her hands were over her mouth, and she looked out through bloodshot eyes full of madness. Slowly her hands came away again. Perhaps some sort of weird aura radiated from her form, because D's right hand still gripped his sword's hilt.

"No . . ." Iriya's voice was like that of a withered crone.

She backed away. Her movements suggested there was something right in front of her she needed to escape.

"The door was shut . . . How did you get in here? Who are you? *What* are you?"

"She's slipped back into the past!" the hoarse voice said from the vicinity of D's left hand. "She's reliving that night. Stay back. The Nobles' structure is responding to the girl's emotions. Do yousee it?"

D nodded. He'd discerned the overlapping figures in black that stood less than a foot in front of him.

"Well, what do you know! I recognize some of 'em," said the hoarse voice. "The second from the right—that's a Noble by the name of Langlan. He had a courteous nature, and his reputation with those in his domain wasn't bad, but that was the word seven or eight millennia ago. Wouldn't have expected to see him throwing in with this lot. The others are Viscount Albidozen, Count Zegreib, and two I don't know."

The man at the forefront closed his hand tight around Iriya's throat. The illusion threatened to become reality.

"Keep away from me!" Iriya cried, her right hand darting to her hip before a stark flash mowed through the torso of a figure in black.

Reality threatened the illusion, as well. The attacker faded away.

At that same instant, Iriya turned toward D. There was definite madness in her bloodless face, and her burning eyes fired boundless animosity at the young man called D.

"There it is," the hoarse voice said with apparent satisfaction. "There's the face of a Hunter. Are you gonna give her a fight? If not, there'll be no stopping her!"

Though the Huntress stepped forward, D didn't go anywhere.

"Aren't you gonna move?" the hoarse voice inquired.

"You, too." Iriya raised her sword by the side of her head. "Die!"

Her stance was flawless. Energy radiated up from the earth through the soles of her shoes, traveling straight up her spine from her waist, racing to her shoulders, elbows, and wrists. The blade of her sword channeled it.

Beyond her wide arc, a smaller silvery one was sharply executed. Iriya's blade was effortlessly deflected.

"Look at me," said the hoarse voice.

Iriya's eyes turned toward the Hunter's left hand.

"No! The face—*his* face."

Ripples of rapture spread through Iriya's countenance.

Taking a step forward, D planted his left hand on the nape of her neck. Swiftly catching her as she collapsed, he tossed her onto the sofa.

"Couldn't you be a little gentler with her? She only drew on you because she was out of her mind!"

"Anyone else she would've killed," D said.

"That's—well, that's true, actually. Didn't seem like a woman's blow in the least. I can say with pretty much total confidence there's no way she could've got that way through any amount of training. That said, it doesn't look like the girl's undergone any kind of upgrades for Hunting, either. That leaves what—hypnosis? If you were only average to start, that couldn't possibly give you superhuman skill!"

"If you're so concerned about it, try asking her."

Holding his left hand out in front of him, D once again went for his scabbard with the right.

"W-wait a second!" The palm of his left hand turned to D, saliva flying from the flustered mouth that took indistinct shape in it.

The storm broke around dawn. As the morning sun rose in the east, the white steam above the drenched plains gave the air a comfortable humidity.

They left the dome in the early morning, and the steam had faded by the time they spotted a battered guidepost. McCrory 20 Miles, it read.

"It won't even take us an hour," Iriya said encouragingly to Meeker, who was seated right behind her on the steed.

The boy nodded, then looked down.

"We'll see you safely that far. Don't worry."

There was no reply. After the horse had gone five or six paces, the boy said flatly, "I don't wanna go."

"What?"

"My uncle's my father's younger brother, but they didn't like each other. Heck, the only reason he was taking me in was because my father left me a little money. Until the people from the orphanage told him that, he didn't want me."

"And you don't have any of the money?"

"Nadja ran off with all of it."

"That's awful!" Iriya said, crinkling her lovely brow.

She knew that having lost the only thing of value he'd possessed, the boy would be branded a burden, and she could well imagine how he'd be treated.

"What does your uncle do for work?"

“He’s the mayor.”

“Seriously?”

“The mayor of McCrory.”

“And yet he was refusing to take you in?”

Though there were plenty of things Iriya wanted to say, she stopped herself. Even though she was on his side, she knew anything she’d say would wound Meeker.

“Everyone except family is dead weight. And when it comes right down to it, killing family’s not a problem either.”

Iriya shut her eyes. To her right, there was an oddly amused chuckle from D’s left hand.

“Even at his age, he’s seen nothing but trouble. Should grow up to be quite a realist.”

“Didn’t your family get along all right?” Iriya said to change the topic.

“Not really,” he said to the warrior woman, who was looking up at the heavens. “My father was in charge of the village treasury, and he and my mother didn’t see eye to eye. They fought a lot. My mother even shot him with a gun!”

“Sounds like a million laughs.”

“But everybody said that was to be expected. Since she was from the Capital, she should’ve known from the start she wasn’t cut out for living way off in a little Frontier village, they said. I think so, too. After all, whenever she had any spare time, my mother would sit by the window and sing songs from the Capital.”

Iriya let out a sigh, taking care that the boy wouldn’t notice.

What did Meeker make of his mother, who had no escape from reality but her songs? How did he feel when he heard her singing?

“So, your mother—”

The boy started speaking, cutting off Iriya.

“She took the village’s money and ran off. When I went to bring my father his lunch, there was no one in the room, but the strongbox had been left sitting on his desk. An official who came to my father’s funeral told me about it. I haven’t seen my mother since.”

“Do you hate her?”

“Not at all.”

Out of the corner of his eye, D saw the little head shake from side to side.

“She wasn’t cut out for that. She was more suited to the automated houses of the Capital and silk dresses and the fine food of expensive restaurants where the staff waited on you hand and foot—not keeping house in a deep forest where the sun never shines or by the lakes where the water beasts live, wearing heavy clothes and working in the fields till her hands were callused. We only get one life to live, right? So it’s clearly right to live in the world that suits you best. My mother made a

mistake. She was wrong to marry my father and go back to a village on the Frontier, and she was wrong to have me. And the sooner mistakes can be corrected, the better."

For a while, Iriya fell silent. "A mistake, eh?" she murmured after a moment. "I think there's only one mistake your mother made."

"Oh?"

"Leaving a kid like you behind."

Meeker laughed sadly. "That's nice of you to say. I like you, lady. But —"

"We have to put ourselves in her shoes?"

"That's right."

"You must take after your father, I'm sure."

Iriya reached one arm back and patted the boy on the head. Immediately bringing it back again, she trained a trenchant gaze ahead. "D, you see that, don't you?"

"It's a stagecoach," D replied.

Squinting her eyes, Iriya said, "It doesn't have a driver. No one's riding shotgun, either."

"Wait here."

As he spoke, D nudged his steed's flanks. Quickly closing on the coach, he seized the reins and stopped the team of four cyborg horses drawing it. Quickly, he opened the door.

Seeing that he was looking in her direction, Iriya advanced on her horse. Pulling up alongside D, she peered in through the open doorway. The seats were empty.

"There's no one inside! They weren't attacked, either—there's no sign anybody was onboard."

"The horses somehow ran off with the coach."

"Without anybody noticing? Hardly seems likely, does it?"

Stagecoaches would usually stop for about an hour for feeding and maintenance of the team—ninety-nine percent of which involved work on their legs—at specialized factories in town, as well as to allow the passengers time for a break and a meal. When the passengers were staying for the night, their departure would be put off until the following morning.

Aside from the Nobility's teleporters and Mach cars, the predominant means of transportation on the Frontier was cyborg horses. There were more than a few cars powered by steam, gasoline, or other fuels, but in terms of range, performance, and dependability, they couldn't compare to cyborg horses. As a result, horse maintenance was of the utmost importance. Large towns, of course, had factories for upgrading, inspecting, and repairing cyborg horses, while in smaller towns someone could be hired to do repairs, but the purchase of a new steed would usually entail paying a price far beyond legal guidelines. If, while out in the wilderness, someone should meet with an unexpected misfortune

that killed their steed, they would have little choice but to walk however many hundreds of miles to their destination. The chance of running into a horse trader roaming the Frontier in search of such travelers was less than one in a hundred.

A full team of four horses with a coach attached didn't just run out of any town where people were thinking straight.

"Something's happened in McCrory!" Iriya said, training an even sharper gaze forward.

"I'll go on ahead. You two wait here. Don't go near the town."

As D wheeled his steed around, Iriya protested, "No way. I want—"

D was already galloping away, but his left hand was pointed in her direction. On noticing what his finger indicated, Iriya stopped her right foot from prodding her horse's flank.

It was Meeker.

As her eyes followed the black-clad figure of beauty rapidly dwindling in the distance, Iriya muttered to herself, "Are you cold blooded? Warm? I just can't tell."

Pursuers

chapter 3

I

The manner of barring the main entrance varied in each town and village, but in McCrory it was a palisade of thick tree trunks sunk side by side. The gates could slide back to the fence on either side, and D turned to the one on the right and pushed it in, entering the opening it left in the great palisade around the town.

Once through the gate, he commanded an excellent view of the main street and the homes lining either side of it.

"No smell of blood—that's odd," the Hunter's left hand murmured as it gripped the reins. It sounded as if it would've had its head cocked to one side.

"Of course, there's no signs of anyone either," said D. Beneath the black brim of his traveler's hat, his eyes held a quiet gleam.

His horse didn't halt. On encountering a weird situation, it was *normal* people who felt an urge to kill. Once through the entrance, the horse and rider started down the main thoroughfare, swaddled in stark sunlight. Not a single soul was on the street, and the Hunter rode without so much as a glance at the rows of houses to either side, his steed not stopping until they were in front of a saloon. Dismounting, D tethered the horse's reins to a post.

"No one's here!" the hoarse voice was heard to say once the Hunter had pushed open the door.

The quiet interior of the establishment bore out the hoarse voice's words. However—

"There were people here about an hour ago," the hoarse voice continued. "There's nicotine and alcohol in the air."

D looked down at an ashtray on the table. A cigarette had fallen from it, burning the table and leaving a long strip of ash in its shape. Most of the tables had glasses and cards on them, though a few had been overturned, spilling their contents. Following the path of the disturbance, the Hunter saw a broken glass on the floor and a half-dried puddle of alcohol.

"There's half a steak here, with a piece of it still stuck on the fork. In other words, something happened just as they were taking a bite. Something that made 'em drop their glasses and cigarettes."

D twisted around to face the door. That was the direction most of the chairs pulled away from the tables faced. The patrons had pushed their chairs back and risen to face whatever had come through the door.

“There’s no smell of gunpowder. Somebody might’ve drawn a sword, but it looks like most of them accepted their fate without doing a thing,” said the hoarse voice.

D went over to the bar and looked behind the counter. A double-barreled shotgun still sat in the customary place. It appeared the bartender hadn’t even had time to go for the weapon.

“What came in?”

The hoarse voice didn’t answer.

D went outside.

“What’s this?” the hoarse voice exclaimed, sounding intrigued.

There was no sign of the Hunter’s cyborg horse.

“That’s no small feat, taking that horse without you or me noticing it.”

“You’re the one who didn’t notice.”

“Huh?”

“A formless presence is on the move. It came from the center of town and got rid of the horse.”

“Where’d it go?”

“Back where it came from.”

In less than five minutes’ time, D stood in front of an old cylindrical building. A theater.

Though entertainment on the Frontier wasn’t as rare as those in the Capital believed, anything culturally redolent of the Capital was restricted to the traveling plays and concerts that might visit a few times a year. It was easy to dismiss those who constructed such theaters, both large and small, as bumpkins or pretentious posers. But in a theater much smaller and simpler than this, in a community far more isolated than this town, one Yuna O’Conner—considered the world’s greatest violinist—had packed the house day in and day out from the time he was a child. He referred to the boards of that theater’s wood-plank stage as his “parents.”

The front doors had been left wide open, and D passed through one of the many doors set in the wall within. This had to be the theater’s stage. A stone floor about thirty feet in diameter, it was surrounded by stone seats that radiated out from it and climbed gradually to a height of about fifteen feet.

On the Frontier, theater was like a drug that people had a love-hate relationship with—the genius playwright OX had worked for the Nobility, penning the series of plays called the *Aristocrat Saga*, in which any nameless hick actor could deliver his lines in a monotone, and the seasoned audience members would still offer up thunderous applause that would shake the sunlight, the moonlight, and even the wind.

Regrettably, this time there was no applause at all.

D turned first as if moving his head to catch the sound of the wind, then angled his eyes upward. In the last row of seats on the northern side was a man with his hair pulled back in a ponytail. He wore a leather cape over a reddish floor-length coat.

"Nice of you to come. Thought maybe I was gonna have to go get you!" Grinning from ear to ear, he said, "I'm Isaac Nogia. I'm a drifter and a warrior. I've always wanted to meet the great D we hear so much about all over the Frontier!"

"Who hired you?"

"Why, Baron Mitterhaus. I'm sure you must've heard of him. He was a big deal back in the day, with two hundred villages and a hundred and forty-eight towns under his thumb in these parts. The first Mitterhaus was attacked and slain by the lousy farmers, but the one who took his place prides himself on his hidden power."

"He's not anyone I've been hired to deal with."

"So why is he gunning for you, you wonder? On account of you're just so goddamn good looking. Nah, just kidding. It's not you I've got business with. It's the girl."

"Why?"

"Damned if I know," Nogia replied, shrugging his shoulders. His ponytail swayed. "But if a Frontier Noble went to all the trouble of hiring me and the rest to catch 'er, he's probably got a damned good reason. So, if you'll keep out of this, I won't mess with you. Just tell yourself you barely know her."

From the start, she'd been someone D barely knew. But if someone had been able to peer into his mind at that moment, they'd undoubtedly have seen something quite interesting.

The man whose beauty shamed the very sunlight stared silently at the other man. A heartbeat later, Nogia leapt out of his seat like a shot from a gun.

"Well, surprise, surprise! I'd heard D was a loner, through and through. Since when do you side with a woman that's got nothing to do with you? Oh, I get it. She hired you, did she?" Nogia's tall frame trembled fiercely. "Now that's a real look you've got in your eye. I've come across a ton of assholes saying they've been through hell and back, but you're the real deal. It'll be an honor to fight you!"

"What happened to the people in this town?"

Nogia furrowed his brow. The Hunter's gorgeous, steely voice had suddenly changed to the hoarse tones of a geezer.

"You practicing your ventriloquism or something? Well, as for the townsfolk, my pet doggie got 'em."

"They were gobbled up?"

"Pretty much. My buddy only needs to eat once a month, but you wouldn't believe how much he packs away. Swallowed everything from cyborg horses to housecats, but in the meantime the stagecoach bolted.

If it weren't for that, we'd have lured that girl in here with you. Not a problem, though. Sorry, but you're gonna drown in the sea of acid in my buddy's stomach."

"Here it comes!" the hoarse voice said.

D stood there quietly. It was as if he hadn't even heard the voice.

Perhaps frightened by that blossom of black ice, Nogia shouted loudly, "Come on out, buddy!"

D's eyes reflected something white gushing from the man's mouth. A shadow passed across the sun. In midair, the form spread like a pink parasol. The umbrella looked to be more than thirty feet across, and a split second before its lower rim could touch the ground behind the Hunter, there was a silvery flash from D's back. The blade he drew slashed at least six feet into the thing. And then D bounded into the air.

He landed a good six feet from the rim of the umbrella.

"Not good," an urgent tone from the vicinity of his left hand told him.

D's body was tinged with white. The brim of his traveler's hat, the hem of his coat, and more than anything the blade of his sword were giving off a whitish smoke. The instant the umbrella was cut, a transparent liquid had poured like rain from inside it. It was acid strong enough to melt the steel blade of the Hunter's sword.

"That thing—it's his stomach," the left hand whispered. "And that acid could dissolve iron. You'd do well to avoid it!"

D discarded his sword. Before him was a rippling mass of digestive organs the size of a small bog, which quickly began giving off the same white smoke.

From a distance, Nogia called out, "I should expect as much from the man known as D. Will we take each other down now, or call it a draw—aargh!"

He ended in a cry of pain. A needle of stark wood, hurled by D, had pierced the white smoke—and Nogia.

"You—you son of a bitch—I can't believe you . . ."

As he groaned in a tone of astonishment and despair, the pale pink ground rose up.

Leaping more than fifteen feet away from the thing bearing down on him like a tsunami, D went for the dagger on his hip with his right hand.

The white smoke suddenly pulled back. As it was sucked into the theater seats with surprising speed, it called to mind a deflating balloon.

There was no sign of Nogia.

"You threw a second needle at him, but it missed all his vitals? He's not too shabby, either." Sniffing loudly, the hoarse voice continued, "From the scent of blood, I think you might've nailed him in an artery. He won't be moving for a while. But if Mitterhaus of all people is gunning for her, that girl sure must have a hell of a secre—gaaah!"

Jamming his left hand against the brim of his traveler's hat, D charged toward where Nogia had been. His running speed was so great it seemed as if he flew there.

Blood had spilled on the floor, and D's eyes followed a trail of splotches to a narrow exit. He headed for it without hesitation.

The Hunter's left hand shifted from the hat to the hem of his coat, where it coughed and sputtered as it said, "As always, you're a hard master for your left hand! You're gonna make me get rid of all this strong acid, too?" It quickly continued, "What's wrong? Snap out of it!"

One hand still braced against the stone wall, D was slowly sinking toward the floor. His back quaked, and the mass of blood he spat on the floor spread like a crimson blossom.

"Poisoned blood?" the hoarse voice said in a stuffy tone, holding its breath.

Less than a second later the next gob of blood flew, bringing a gory flower into bloom on one of the seats.

II

The sound of singing reached their ears less than five minutes after D had gone into town. Both of them looked around, but of course there was no sign of anyone. It was a phantasmal voice, seeming to come both from the heavens on high and the bowels of the earth—a woman's voice that would hardly be described as beautiful, yet at some point both the idea of searching for the source of the song and that of fleeing to somewhere where they'd no longer hear it vanished from Iriya's mind. The voice was like the threads of a mysterious spider's web, snagging Iriya's and Meeker's brains, digging into them, restricting the movements of the most critical faculties.

Turning to Meeker, Iriya said, "Let's go."

"Okay." Meeker nodded. His eyes, like hers, were strangely

unfocused.

Taking the reins, the Huntress turned her cyborg horse around, and the two of them began riding back the way they'd come.

Before they'd gone five hundred yards, a desolate rocky place appeared to their right. A short time earlier, they'd passed this spot without any trouble. Here and there the rocks were punctuated with dashes of green in the form of such plants as rough bloom and water-free grass in patches of varying size but similar shape. In keeping with rumors that this had been one of the Nobility's quarries in ancient times, chunks and slabs of cut stone were lying all around.

It soon became apparent that the pair's destination was about a hundred feet ahead: a slab of rock that lay at an angle with its right end sticking up.

Who would've thought to cut such a piece of stone, how had they managed it, and why had they abandoned it? Though the end was only about thirty feet in the air, the slab seemed to stretch through the entire quarry, easily surpassing six hundred feet in length. It was about thirty feet wide, and more than ten feet thick. The apparent foolishness of whoever had cut it was overridden by the sense of grandeur the slab inspired, with its mass probably in excess of three hundred tons.

Even on seeing the beautiful woman seated at the upper end of the slab brushing her hair, the two travelers didn't reveal so much as a wisp of emotion on their faces.

Before long they'd crunched across the rocks to reach the base of the stone slab, at which point the singing seemed to cut off.

If a student or a scholar who'd heard the ancient legends had been there, they probably would've been able to recall the name of the siren who sat atop an enormous stone, possessed of a rare singing voice that bewitched those steering their boats up and down the great river below and led them to reduce their craft to flotsam on the jagged rocks.

Dressed in a gossamer robe of silver, the woman had hair so golden the light of the sun paled by comparison. After standing up and bounding from the stone, she landed lightly in front of the pair. Her robe seemed to go on forever, its folds swaying elegantly in the breeze.

"Welcome. My name is Lorelei. I'm so pleased you seemed to enjoy my song."

Iriya knew instinctively that this woman was evil. Her alluring singing voice, the spectacularly acrobatic entrance she'd made, and more than anything, the sensuousness and air of the supernatural that billowed from her captivating form were proof of that. She had to get Meeker to a safe place so she could counterattack. However, that notion dissolved in the powerful acids of her brain, changing, keeping Iriya from fighting.

Still, on seeing the Huntress's hand beginning to creep toward the scabbard on her hip, the woman—Lorelei—smiled alluringly.

"Even a full-fledged warrior can't move a muscle when he hears my song. You're really something special. It's no use, though. Hear it once, and you're my slave. Now, come with me."

The woman took Iriya's horse by the bridle and was about to walk away when she halted. Looking behind Iriya, she said, "Can't have any unnecessary baggage. I have no use for you, so I'll do away with you here."

Gesturing with one arm to the end of the stone slab she'd occupied, she said, "There's something interesting just over there. See it—and die."

Though her tone was businesslike, there was enough seductiveness in Lorelei's voice to make up for it. Even a grown man would do whatever she said without being under her spell, and no other man would blame him for it.

Nodding, Meeker got down off the horse.

Watching the diminutive figure skillfully scramble up a rock shelf, the beauty who called herself Lorelei twisted her lips into an evil grin and then started down the road Iriya had come by. And as she did, the terrible siren song once again began to issue from her vermilion lips.

The same song reverberated in Meeker's brain. And as it did, the suggestion he'd just received—to see what was over there and die—became a powerful compulsion. He didn't have strength enough left to fight it.

Reaching Lorelei's slab of stone, the boy climbed to the top and looked over the other side. And there he stood, rooted. A scene spread before him. Though interesting, it could hardly be called fascinating. In his present state of mind, nothing Meeker saw would move him, but even if he'd been in his right mind, he probably wouldn't have comprehended what he was seeing. Or not so much *what* as *where*.

The rock had been cleanly cut away to a depth of three feet in an area almost thirty feet square. On the midpoint of each side just beyond the edge of the nearly square depression were holes for what must once have been pillars, and judging by the face that remained on a ten-foot-tall religious icon that stood before the hole on the northern side, this had been, if not a temple, then at least a place for some sort of religious rituals. However, it was undoubtedly something other than this that Lorelei had described as interesting.

In the carved-out section were steep stone steps, a huge stone altar, some sort of washing area, and rust-covered machines whose purpose was unknown, and bizarre creatures were wriggling on or around all of these things. A human adult might barely be able to get their arms around the thick, ten-foot-long body of one of these creatures. In form they resembled colossal leeches, while their supple movements called to mind a smaller version of the great worms. There seemed to be dozens of them, and the way they writhed in the sunlight, twitching and

twisting, was so horrible it would've caused the boy to run away screaming had his will been his own. In fact, Meeker's feet became rooted for an instant, Lorelei's suggestion forgotten. However, it was only for an instant, and erasing the vision of terror that filled his eyes, the boy walked toward the awful workroom of death without further hesitation.

The creatures infesting the work area were carnivores. While most similar species usually inhabited dark, swampy areas, this kind could also operate in daylight, which aided them in gathering food. The secret of their vitality was pressurized water reserves stored beneath their skin, which allowed them to remain aboveground for nearly twelve hours. Their nest was under this area, and they would periodically surface and crawl around, feeding on spiders and birds—and travelers.

And now the sort of delectable morsel they hadn't tasted for decades was headed into their midst. Their olfactory senses caught the odor of their prey, sensors in their skin cells felt the vibrations of feet making contact with the ground, their hearing made out the footsteps—they could even catch the sound of the blood pumping through the prey's veins. They lacked sight. The writhing denizens of the earth's depths had no use for eyes. The remaining senses conveyed everything.

Big. Soft. Tasty.

That was how the information would've looked in human language, and their primitive senses transformed the hunger that pervaded them into adrenaline. Moving their long bodies just like inchworms, the invertebrates raced toward their prey.

Two forces tormented Meeker. One was Lorelei's command to die, the other a primal wish for self-preservation—and though the two urges clashed, he backed away only a single step before halting.

One of the insects before him had closed to within ten feet. It had a blunt head split in a cross shape. Its crimson maw had rows of stark fangs like glassy thorns.

A streak of light fell from the sky. Over Meeker's head, the small gleam became dozens of arrows of light that lanced through the insects' bodies. Surprisingly enough, the projectiles pierced the very rock. Most of them had found their mark, but the few that hadn't were jutting from the stone of the quarry.

Perhaps those strays had been intended for the creature that ignored its shuddering compatriots and launched itself at Meeker. However, just as its pernicious fangs were about to close on the boy's head, a horizontal streak of silver pierced the loathsome insect.

On landing, D hurled three more needles that impaled the remaining creatures, then coughed violently. The left hand he used to cover his mouth was stained with blood.

"You haven't fully recovered yet—and I ain't so hot, either."

Even when Meeker heard the hoarse voice say that, his color didn't

return, and he looked impassively at D and his ghastly state.

"He's mesmerized, I'd say," the hoarse voice remarked, sounding somewhat pained.

D put his bloodstained hand to Meeker's head.

"Well, I'll be—he's been captivated by the Lorelei's song. Not good. He'll stay this way until the one who bound him is slain or the spell is broken!"

"You could do it, couldn't you?" D said. His lips and mouth were both covered with fresh blood. Even racked by deadly poison, he had a voice as cold as ice and steel.

"Yeah. It's pretty painful, though!"

"For which of you?"

"Me, actually."

The Hunter's hand went flat against Meeker's brow. A faint groan could be heard, but D paid it no mind, surveying his surroundings as he held the pose.

A cloud rolled across the heavens. The shadow it cast on the earth casually crept from east to west, and when it reached the young man and the boy in the quarry, D had already taken his left handaway.

Scooping up the reeling Meeker, he went over to the impaled insects. Piercing them at an angle and sticking into the rock below were silver arrows over two feet long.

"Silver," the hoarse voice murmured, sounding impressed.

III

"Silver, as a protection against evil?" D said, evaluating the balance of one of the arrows as he looked up at the sky.

"Could it be . . ." With those hoarse words, a human face began to rise from the palm of D's left hand. Astonishingly enough, it was grinning. "Was it *that girl*, D?"

D clenched his fist. With a squeal, the human face faded. Its appearance had been fleeting.

Shaking his head a bit, Meeker asked, "Did someone scream just now?" He was staring at the Hunter's left hand.

"You must've imagined it."

"Okay . . ."

The stupefied boy still didn't quite comprehend either this situation or the one before it, yet his ears caught a voice not entirely angry or cold, saying, "What, are you trying to weasel out of this? If we're talking silver arrows here, it can only be *her*. Gianne—gaaaah!"

D gave his hand a violent shake, as if to deal it the coup de grâce, and then asked, "Can you walk?"

Nodding, the boy stiffened. He'd just remembered the business with the demonic invertebrates. Wrapping his arms around himself, he was starting to collapse when D said to him, "Iriya was taken."

The Hunter's words ran a stiff wire through the boy's sagging frame.

"*Taken?* Where is she?"

"You were the last one to see her."

Stunned, Meeker shrank back. The little blue eyes in his tiny face blinked repeatedly, then unexpectedly focused on a point in space. "Oh, that's right! There was this woman named Lorelei—and she went that way!"

He pointed in the direction of the road that'd brought D there.

"How long ago was this?"

After thinking for a moment, the boy replied, "I don't really know. Ten minutes, maybe twenty—"

"I'm going after them. You wait here."

"No! No way am I doing that!"

"I'll bring her back. You'll just be in the way."

The boy fell silent. "I—I could help . . . somehow."

"No one's after you. Just stay here a while."

Without waiting for Meeker's reply, D leapt from the stone lip and sailed through the air.

"Will we make it in time? You don't have a horse!" the hoarse voice said, becoming a wind that whispered in the Hunter's ear.

As he landed, D raised his left hand.

"Fortunately, we're downwind of them, yessir," the hoarse voice said with satisfaction. "Those woods over there. But make it fast. I smell blood. We might be too late!"

Less than two minutes later D charged into the forest more than a mile and a quarter away from the quarry. Although it stood to reason that a dhampir would inherit some of the leg strength of the Nobility, this young man had a speed that would shock even pure-blooded Nobles. Taking no measure of his surroundings, he dashed another two hundred yards, then halted.

"There we go," the hoarse voice said.

A clearing suddenly appeared between the clusters of trees. Just off to the right stood a black carriage with a team of four horses, and about ten feet from it Iriya crouched on the ground. Lavishly decorated with gold and drawn by gorgeous black steeds, the carriage was clearly that of a Noble. Iriya had been brought to this clearing by Lorelei. And a Noble had been waiting here. It was obvious what had occurred. Even the speed of D's legs hadn't been enough to prevent this tragedy from unfolding.

However—before D could even approach Iriya, he noticed something: there was no smell. Actually, there was the lingering scent one would expect to come from the gore clinging to the dagger Iriya clutched in her hand, but no scent of blood drifted from her. And her throat was free of wounds.

"Looks like she's okay. Not only that, but she might've bagged a

prize turkey, too."

The hoarse voice was referring to the jet-black cape and other garments that lay midway between Iriya and the carriage. Ash-gray dust clung to them in spots.

D lifted the cape. Dust billowed up, falling back to the earth or riding off on the almost imperceptible breeze.

"A knife for self-defense and a bracelet with electronic weaponry, plus the cigar and that crest—no doubt about it, these are all that remain of Mitterhaus." The hoarse voice trailed off in surprise.

D looked at Iriya.

"It's just—well, I can't really see that girl dispatching a Noble and not even getting bit . . . When you think about it, Mitterhaus is a ruthless, vile monster, one of the ten worst on the entire Frontier! To take him down so easily . . . Hmm, is that someone else over there?"

Beyond the enormous tree that loomed behind the carriage, a foot and silvery robes could be glimpsed. Going over to check, D found the corpse of Lorelei, who'd been stabbed through the heart from behind with a dagger. He also discovered the driver reduced to dust, still in his perch on the carriage.

"First, this Lorelei who brought Iriya here was stabbed from behind and killed. By the workmanship on the dagger, it seems Mitterhaus may have done the deed personally. Following that, Mitterhaus tried to attack Iriya but was slain, and his driver was killed as well."

After that skillful explanation, the hoarse voice fell into silence for a short time.

"Mitterhaus either attacked Iriya or put her in his carriage so he could take her away. Iriya must've been able to stab him because Lorelei had been put down first. Iriya ran outside, Mitterhaus followed her out here, and that's where he croaked. His driver was trying to save him when he met his end—got any problem with that?"

"Nope," D responded. "With the spell of Lorelei's song broken, Iriya slew the Noble. Simple enough—but easier said than done."

"Right you are. As good of a Hunter as she might be, I could see her taking out some pseudo-Nobility or hired warriors, but not slaying a Greater Noble with millennia under his belt this easily. Not even if she got the drop on him. After all, once Lorelei's power over her was broken, Mitterhaus probably would've used his own hypnotism on her. Or did it not affect her?"

Though it seemed much longer, less than two minutes had passed since D had found Iriya.

"Mitterhaus is destroyed," D told her. "Did you slay him?"

Not moving her eyes from the spot on the ground where they were fixed, she replied, "I don't know—can't recall anything. The last thing I remember . . . here I was. D, when did you get here? It was you that took down Mitterhaus, wasn't it?"

“Unfortunately, no.”

D’s gaze once again focused on the pale nape of her neck. Not even his eyes could find the faintest flaw. He put his left hand against her forehead as well, but there was nothing out of the ordinary there. And that was the end of the matter.

A tremendous mystery seemed to linger nearby with its maw gaping disturbingly wide, but D got Iriya up on her feet, then helped her onto one of the horses from the carriage.

“D . . . What on earth’s going on with me?” she asked in a tone so doleful she seemed to doubt whether tomorrow would even come.

“Take the reins,” D replied.

His good looks and cool voice seemed enough to solve Iriya’s mystery. Nodding as if she understood as much, the warrior woman gripped the reins, a smile rising on her lips.

Ballad of the Wilderness

chapter 4

I

The sun went down. The curtain came up on the “Time of the Nobility.”

D chose not the forest for their camp, but rather the middle of the plain. There was no guarantee that this location would be entirely safe, but being out on the plain gave an unobstructed view on all sides, which was clearly better than being in a forest, where supernatural creatures crawled under cover of bushes or lurked behind trees. Collecting some dead wood and dry grass, D made a fire. Before the sun had sunk they’d had their meal while still on horseback. The smell of cooking would be just the thing to draw vicious supernatural beasts. However, there was nothing the travelers could do to cover their own scents, nor could they stop the sound of their heartbeats. They could only take the chance that they’d be able to escape the ultrakeen senses of famished monsters and demons.

“So, it’s been two days—tomorrow we should hit Clements, right?” Iriya said in a somewhat relieved tone, even as her eyes remained trained on their surroundings.

She was referring to the time they’d been traveling since they’d left McCrory. For someone expecting relentless pursuit and ambushes, it wasn’t surprising she would hope the last two days of peace would carry over into the next day. The difference between towns populated with humans and the endless expanse of wilderness was truly like comparing heaven and hell.

“Don’t go dropping your guard,” the hoarse voice said. “Around these parts, the things that live out on the plains change so fast it’d make your head spin. No telling what’ll pop up. Though it still beats the woods or a forest, I guess.”

“It’s okay,” Meeker said as he laid out his sleeping bag. “From the look of the stars, we’re at the northern end of Sector Ninety-Six. Not many dangerous things up here.”

“Oh, aren’t you well informed,” Iriya said playfully, giving him a look of admiration.

A broad smile of satisfaction spread across his face.

It was always at times like this that something had to interrupt.

“Heh, heh! Interesting. This is the same squirt who can’t do anything ri—gaaaaah!”

The hoarse voice was immediately muzzled.

D sat silently by the fire, feeding it branches.

"Thank you," Iriya told him. She was grateful he'd cut short the snide remarks.

"Sorry—I know I'm useless," Meeker apologized weakly.

Though Iriya had spent the last two days coaching him in how to take care of the horses and how to use knives and guns, Meeker showed zero aptitude for these things. On the other hand, Iriya's skill drew praise from the hoarse voice. "No one's born that good!" it'd said. "The girl's had magical instruction. Maybe that'd start to explain how she could take down Mitterhaus, eh?"

D had given no reply.

"No problem. Don't worry about it at all," Iriya told the boy, giving him a pat on his little back.

Stammering, "O-okay," the boy smiled at her, but immediately looked down at the ground. Apparently the scrutiny made him uncomfortable.

Iriya glared at D—or rather, at his left hand—then looked up at the Hunter's face as he tossed something out into the wilderness, saying irately, "Can't you do anything about that thing?"

"Would that I could."

Once he'd finished throwing things in all four directions, D squeezed his hand into a fist. Every time he did, a tiny death rattle pierced the night. Ten times it rang out.

As the night deepened, the air grew colder. Meeker had been right: they didn't encounter anything dangerous. At least, nothing that lived out in the wilderness.

The only thing this strategy could be likened to was waves breaking on a beach. So long as the coast was in the distance, they went on forever, closing without a sound. They made a noise when other waves followed after them. But a single wave was silent. The same went for this "wave."

He'd spread it three-quarters of a mile wide, then closed in on the group. So they couldn't escape. So it could swallow up every last one of them and digest them all. It was fifty yards from its target, and the man controlling it was confident of his success.

Three miles away, this spot was beyond even a dhampir's sight. Through a pair of the Nobility's binoculars procured from a curio shop, he could see the three figures sleeping around the campfire. Just another fifty yards to go—now he let his stomach pounce.

However, a second later the master of that stomach was gripped by a feeling that something wasn't right. A feeling akin to fear. Though he'd discharged the contents of his stomach and taken every precaution, his stomach had begun to devour something. It didn't seem possible anyone could detect its presence, its movements. Except for D, perhaps?

"Go!" he bellowed, his cry carrying despair.

His stomach shot up like a colossal cloud—and then a vicious pain turned him into spasm-racked stone.

Did he finish it off?

At the same time he felt the death tremors of his stomach, he drew his dagger and cut off the esophagus that protruded from his mouth. He was three miles off. More than enough distance to make his escape. However, as he got to his feet again, his body was racked by a huge—and final—tremor. When he thudded to the ground, the arrow that'd diagonally pierced his throat from above gleamed faintly and deeply silver in the moonlight.

"Don't move," D told her, but as soon as he'd got up and left, Iriya heard the voice of a woman in the distance. At first she tensed at the thought that it was Lorelei, but she quickly remembered that the sorceress was dead. Besides, this sounded like shouting. She didn't think to call out for D. Her warrior's blood raced through her.

Making sure that Meeker was asleep, she concentrated her gaze in the direction of the voice, and there something like a white mist hovered in the depths of the darkness. On realizing that it was drawing closer, Iriya went for the hilt of her longsword.

In less than two seconds' time, a woman in a long white robe took shape. She had a countenance so lovely it made even Iriya sigh in spite of herself, and it seemed as if the moonlight illuminated her face alone.

Come.

The sweet, sad voice that echoed in the Huntress's ears was indeed that of a woman.

Come to me, and I shall make you forget all the pains of this world.

Sight and sound—her brain must've been devastated by the alluring beauty that crept in through those two of her senses, because Iriya rose unsteadily to her feet.

The woman was right before her. Her arms were spread, the sleeves of her robe flowing down like the Milky Way.

Come to me, and I shall make you forget everything and anything. Like so.

Looping her arm around Iriya's back, the beautiful woman smiled. It was at that very instant that the lovely countenance split in a cross shape. The rent portion was a noxious hue and had patterns that called to mind a nose and eyes. They were unquestionably the petals of a flower. But the petals had the luster of steel. And then the bud that'd been her head reared back, preparing to assail the blank-faced Iriya.

Though it probably intended to swallow not only the Huntress's head but also her entire body, it was unable to do so. When the woman put her arm around Iriya, the Huntress's hand had never left her weapon's hilt. And the instant the demonic blossom reared back its deadly head, a

horizontal slash mowed through its torso, cleaving it in two.

Falling to the ground without a word was the upper half of the gorgeous woman, which quickly became a bizarre tangle of roots, and the lower half—spurting something that could've been either blood or liquid nutrients—also quickly transformed into a weird stalk and several ambulatory roots.

Leaping ten feet away to avoid a fountain of digestive fluid, Iriya landed and let out a deep breath. That was all it took to return her breathing to normal. A second later, Iriya was gazing down at the bisected remains of the monstrous plant as she returned her blade to its scabbard.

No sooner had she turned her back than there was a cry of "Look out—behind you!" Even before Iriya caught Meeker's words, she was swinging her blade behind her. It was instinct. Before the sword had stopped moving, she leapt off to one side.

Slashing down through the spot she'd occupied and slicing a stone on the ground in two was a whip-like filament that stretched back to the wound in the stock-still lower half of the creature. As its severed portion writhed on the ground, Iriya made a bound for the gravely wounded creature pulling back its deadly whip, this time splitting it lengthwise. The lower half of the creature collapsed in a heap, transforming into the beautiful woman as if that were its swan song, then immediately resuming its true form as it ceased moving.

"Are you okay?" her savior asked, racing toward her, yet the warrior woman seemed ungrateful as she shouted at him to stay back, continuing to glare down at her foe.

"It's dead. You cut its roots off," she heard Meeker say.

"You're right—but how do you know about this thing?"

"Well, it's something called a thrice-split baron. There's not many of them, but they're one of the dangerous creatures found in these parts. Humans rarely run into them, so you don't hear much talk about them, but when they find their prey, they take a similar form to it in order to get closer. I didn't realize that's what it was until it had its arm around you . . . She sure was pretty. I'm surprised it didn't fool you."

"Yeah," Iriya replied with an embarrassed grin, and then she turned to the right. D was just coming back. What remained in Iriya's brain of the beauty of that transformed plant monster now melted away like ice.

Giving her head a shake to push the gorgeous new countenance out of it, Iriya said to Meeker, "You saved me. Thank you. You sure know a lot about Frontier creatures, don't you?"

"Only what I've read in books," Meeker replied bashfully, rubbing the back of his head with a bit of pride.

"Well, thanks to that I'm still alive. You remember that: you saved my life. And I'll be grateful to you for as long as I live."

As the boy nodded, the two of them noticed that D was looking at

them. Though there was no change in his fierce beauty, the two of them had to smile. They'd gotten an impression of a different sort of expression.

An hour later, D found Nogia's corpse. His stomach had gone for the pieces of jerky D had scattered around, and within days that stomach would be filling the bellies of other creatures in the wilderness.

Iriya and Meeker exchanged suspicious looks.

"A falling-out with his partners?" Iriya murmured, but Meeker shook his head. Memories of the incident with the demonic insects, which he'd managed to repress until now, rose to the fore. He described what'd transpired to Iriya.

"In that case, I wonder if it means we've got an ally? D, any idea who it could be?"

Although there was no reply, the two of them got the distinct impression a cry of pain had once again risen from D's left fist.

II

It was late afternoon when they arrived in the town of Clements. With a chain of mountains for a backdrop, the small town sat alone in the wilderness. The remaining light colored the peaks to the west and created a brief world of vermilion before the evening would be enveloped by blue.

"Everyone looks so red. It's incredible!" Iriya exclaimed.

"Yeah, it's like everything's soaked in blood!" the hoarse voice added.

And how did D look in that crimson world? The people on the wooden sidewalks, the men driving wagons, the travelers high in the saddle, the crane operators, the miners with their carts of ore, the prostitutes who might as well have been naked—all of them were drawn at first to his gorgeous visage but pulled back again with looks of horror on their faces. In fact, a traveler's horse and one of the miners' carts collided, knocking all parties involved to the ground.

When they were halfway up Main Street, Iriya turned to a building on their right and said, "If you're looking for the hotel, it's right here."

All D said was "I have somewhere to go."

"Where?" she asked, but then she caught sight of Meeker's face as the boy rode on the horse next to hers. He was utterly crestfallen. Before they'd reached the town he'd spoken less and less, and since entering he hadn't said a word. That told Iriya all she needed to know.

"You're going to put him in an orphanage?"

The Hunter nodded slightly.

"You know where it's at?"

"I saw it on a map once."

Iriya was just about to tell him not to, but then she held her tongue. She considered the trio's respective futures.

"I suppose it's the only way," Iriya said, returning to the boy's side. That was all she could do for him.

Presently, D turned right off Main Street. The road of packed earth stretched like a thread to a distant forest. Five or six hundred yards up ahead stood a simple yet elegant building hardly befitting a mining town. An orphanage.

Iriya snuck a look at Meeker out of the corner of her eye. His little face was turned toward the ground, and tears welled in his eyes. In her heart the woman heaved a sigh, and just as she was about to turn her eyes forward again she heard him say, "I don't wanna go there!"

Iriya shut her eyes.

"I wanna stay with you, Miss Iriya! I wanna travel with you forever and ever."

She couldn't hear him. She mustn't. Iriya vehemently reminded herself that it was in the boy's best interest to have a settled existence. Three hundred yards to go. If he said nothing the rest of the way, it would be done. All she had to do was hold out that long.

"D?" she said when they'd closed to within a hundred yards, her brow furrowing.

D had got there first, but he didn't turn. Catching up to him, Iriya looked closely, then in spite of herself she said, "What—it's closed?"

In the vermilion light, they could see the building's doors were boarded up, and the curtains were drawn on every window. Naturally, there was no sign of anyone. All they found was an uninhabited ruin.

Turning to Meeker, Iriya whispered softly, "Lucky for us, eh?"

"Not very smart, are you, girlie?"

Once again the destroyer of tranquility started to hiccup.

"You mean to tell me you still don't know whether the squirt would be better off with a peaceful life here or continuing on the road with us? You might be used to a life of hardship, but thinking the same holds true for everyone else is about as arrogant as you can get! Besides, there's gotta be a pretty good reason for a place this size falling out of use. Give some thought to that before you start talking about anyone being lucky. Idiot."

"*What* did you say?" Iriya snarled, the corners of her eyes rising.

"There's something odd about this building."

And saying that, D wheeled his steed around. Iriya asked D what was wrong, but naturally the young man didn't answer. He turned in silence back to the road that'd brought them there.

The next place they called on was the sheriff's office, where the group's questions were answered.

Until seven years earlier, the Saint Golderday Orphanage had truly flourished. And then the children and staff had suddenly vanished. One autumn day, what sounded like an enormous key turning in a lock had echoed through town. It wasn't until later that people noticed the

disappearances, though not a single soul could provide an adequate explanation for the pair of bizarre occurrences. The staff of ten and the thirty-seven children never did return, so the institution was boarded up, and seven years later it still stood there in the red glow of autumn.

"If you wanna put him in a specialized institution, head on over to Asnow," said the sheriff, who was tottering on the ass end of middle age. Although he kept his eyes averted from D's face, his voice was dripping with rapture. "If you leave him here in our town, you'd best brace yourselves. Mining towns are rough. There ain't a man jack around here who'll cut you any slack on account of being a kid. To be honest, someone could grab him at any time and make him work in the mines for the rest of his life, and there ain't a thing I could do about it."

"A hell of a place this is," Iriya said, pinching the bridge of her nose. Her tone wasn't critical. She knew as well as anyone that this was the Frontier. "But there's not much we can do about that, right? So, what'll it be, D?"

"Do as you like. Here's where we part company."

"Hold on," the flustered Iriya said as, out of the corner of her eye, she looked at Meeker sitting in a chair in the corner of the room. "How can you be so cold? We can't leave the kid here!"

"Look after him, then," D replied curtly.

"How can you do such an inhuman"—at that point she remembered that D was a dhampir, but regardless, she continued—"thing like leaving him here? He's been with us all this time! Why not consider letting him stay on?"

"I can't say which would be easier: traveling with us or staying here. You come up with the answer."

"But I . . ."

"You have a priest around here?"

D's sudden query had the sheriff bewildered. "Nope. Oh, but he'll be one soon."

"The teacher?"

The sheriff nodded.

In many cases, teachers doubled as religious figures. Since the two vocations had but a few similarities, such ventures often ended in disaster, though the fusion of the hand that scrawled equations on the blackboard and the mouth that extolled the existence of God sounded tempting enough to make many give it a shot.

"Yeah, our teacher-priest might take the kid. Mr. Lazlo's single, but lucky for you, his sweet old mother lives with him."

Having said that, the sheriff stopped as if he'd just remembered something, turning his eyes toward a memo pinned to the side of his desk. There was a date scribbled on it.

"Oh, that's right! Tomorrow's the wall-raising ceremony for the new school. See, the old one went up in smoke about six months back. Mr.

Lazlo's always out there. Go have yourselves a look-see. It's on the northern square. His address is . . ."

Beyond the window, blue darkness was already lurching closer.

The trio went straight to Mr. Lazlo's house. The young teacher had only to answer a pair of questions before the matter of him taking in Meeker was decided.

"It won't be luxurious, but I should be able to give him an ordinary upbringing. Leave him to me."

As the teacher showed his pearly teeth, D said nothing, but he extended his right hand.

"At twelve, I have to go to the school for the wall-raising ceremony. If you like, please join us."

Bidding him farewell, the two Hunters headed for the door. Iriya turned in the doorway. The boy was in a back room, apparently enjoying a game with Lazlo's mother. His cheerful voice brought a smile to Iriya's lips.

Saying nothing to the boy, the two Hunters stepped outside, accompanied by Lazlo.

"Pardon my asking," the teacher said to Iriya, "but it's my understanding that the two of you have no connection whatsoever to the boy—Meeker. Is that correct?"

Iriya gave a small nod.

The teacher continued, "From what I've had the pleasure of seeing, that doesn't seem to be the case at all. I must apologize, but to be perfectly frank, for a while I had my doubts that you weren't in fact his older brother and sister trying to get rid of him. If it's possible, why don't the two of you stay here and live with him?"

"Live?" Iriya said the word as if she'd just heard it for the first time.

"Yes—if you like, for the rest of your days. If that's not possible, then at least until he's old enough for the two of you to go off without hurting him. What do you think of that? I know you must be traveling for some purpose, but . . ."

"Are you so thick you can't tell just by looking at 'em?"

"Excuse me?"

D squeezed his left hand into a tight fist.

"I appreciate the offer, but I'm in a hurry," he said.

"Is that so? And how about you?"

When the teacher's quiet eyes gazed at her, Iriya grew agitated.

No. There's no particular hurry. I'd like to stay here in town and live with Meeker.

Although those words resounded in her heart, Iriya shook her head.

"I'm sorry. I've also got important business to attend to."

"Is that so?" Lazlo said, a smile rising on his lips nonetheless. "In that case, when your business is done, by all means—come back."

"Come back?"

"We'll be waiting. No matter what happens, please—come back to us."

Iriya gazed stupidly at the proffered hand. Something made her take hold of it and give it a shake.

"D?"

The teacher gripped Iriya's hesitant hand between both of his. "We'll be waiting here, however long it takes," he told her. His eyes were focused firmly on Iriya's face.

III

"That's a relief," Iriya said, finally speaking once they were back on Main Street.

Darkness was falling. All the gates around the town would be shut now.

"Now all he has to do is grow up good."

"Maybe he'll be screwed up."

"What?"

Feeling less like someone had just rained on her parade and more like a horrible sadness had washed over her, Iriya pulled tight on the reins.

When she heard the sharp whistle of the wind, Iriya felt cold steel against the nape of her neck. D's quick draw. She hadn't been able to react to it at all.

"Before we went to Lazlo's house, you would've parried that."

Iriya couldn't refute what the Hunter said.

"It's not your fault. But you've started thinking about your own future."

In her heart, Iriya nodded agreement. Lazlo's calming voice came back to her. *We'll be waiting. No matter what happens, please come back to us.* It was an incantation for reclaiming what had been lost. She would return to this town and live with Meeker. She'd lead a new life. For Iriya, it was just like the days of old that'd been taken from her in that valley. Something she'd thought forgotten had begun to give off a golden glow. And it was starting to quietly dissolve the iron will that kept Iriya focused on her mission.

She shouldn't have gone there. The teacher's house had possessed a glow that was poison to Iriya in her present condition.

"You're exactly right," Iriya said, nodding. "I've gone soft. Stay your blade. I can't die here."

There was the sound of D's sword rasping into its sheath.

"I'm going."

Before the Hunter's icy words had ended, Iriya suggested, "Wait until tomorrow."

D started off.

"If you've got business to settle with those guys, you're better off

sticking with me. I'm convinced they've got more in mind than just a preemptive strike against the one hunting them. The fact that Mitterhaus tried to kidnap me instead of killing me is proof of that. Don't you want to know why? Besides, you're the one who took me to that house just now! If that's what's thrown me out of whack, you should at least help me get back to normal, shouldn't you?"

D halted.

"Until noon tomorrow. I don't think it'll kill you to wait that long," Iriya called out to his back, which was still turned to her.

Had he turned around, D would've found that a hitherto-unseen earnestness clouded the girl's face in the darkness.

Mining towns, like any community centered around a given occupation, were filled from first light with unique sounds. The tolling of bells, the creak of wagon wheels, the whinnying of horses, shouts, screams, the whine of swords slicing through the air, and gunshots. To these common noises the sounds of boat engines would be added in a fishing village, or the clamor of feeding and training and the cries of supernatural beasts crated up for sale in a town where guard beasts were raised—and in a mining town, the drone of gantry cranes, jackhammers, and backhoes in operation was an irreplaceable part of the environment.

However, today things were a little different. From early in the morning, speakers concealed around town had been playing a hymn that'd been unearthed in the southern Frontier sectors about a century earlier.

We shall not veer from Thy path
The path Thou hast shown us
Even though strangers
May reject Thy guidance
We shall draw them to Thy path . . .

Shortly before noon, the hotel message boy came up to D's room and handed him a note from Iriya. *Come to the west end of Main Street at 12:00*, it instructed him. Though ash-gray clouds covered the world, a golden glow leaking through them was proof that the sky above was clear.

At ten minutes to twelve, D left the hotel. The eyes of pedestrians were drawn to him as if they were possessed, and on more than a few occasions there was trouble as people or wagons bumped into one another. Prostitutes clad in the scantest possible traces of garishly hued clothing fell over themselves in front of their bordellos, while upstanding women and their daughters reeled, assailed by dizziness and forced to sit and rest in chairs lined up on the front porches of various

buildings.

As Main Street fell into a panic, D reached its west end. A woman in a white dress stood there. Her hair was pulled back in a bun, held in place by a hair band ornamented with crystals, and the white veil over her forehead fluttered in the wind. In her left hand she gripped a longsword, both inappropriate and horrifying.

As she came closer, the faint aroma of perfume wafted around her. The girl was Iriya.

"Been to the barber?" D inquired.

Iriya grinned wryly. *What else could I expect from a man like you?* her expression seemed to say. "Oh, you! It's called a beauty parlor."

The hoarse voice chortled, but that ended with a pained groan.

"Well, how do you like my outfit?"

Taking hold of her skirt, Iriya spun around in an easy circle for him.

Nothing from D.

"We'd better go to the school for the wall raising. That's the whole reason I picked this up at the used-clothes shop."

Oddly enough, mining towns like Clements didn't have many stores that sold brand-new, ready-made clothes. When there was call for such finery, a person had to wait for the merchant wagons to arrive from the Capital or make a special order. If not for that, life on the Frontier wouldn't be possible. Inevitably, new clothes would make their way into secondhand shops. And that was where Iriya had made this purchase.

The gloves that came all the way up to her elbows were embroidered with flowers, and the dress itself was also covered with them. Roses.

"Well?" Iriya asked again. She was clearly expecting compliments.

"It looks good on you," D said in a voice of iron.

"How sweet of you to say that!" Iriya replied, shaking with joy. This wasn't the callous warrior woman who'd slain her own brother, but an ordinary country girl.

"But—did you know when you bought it?"

"Know what?" Iriya furrowed her brow. With a look on her face like she'd made some terrible mistake, she ventured, "I just picked out the prettiest thing they had in the window . . ."

D immediately gave her the answer. "It's a wedding dress."

Iriya was speechless.

"Good thing we're not going to a groundbreaking for a church, eh? People might get the wrong idea."

"Oh, no!"

With desperation on her face, Iriya looked down at the outfit she wore.

"I . . . I'd never so much as been to a wedding in the nearby village . . . I must look like an idiot. I'll go change."

Just as she was about to run off, a black-gloved hand caught her by the elbow.

"What?"

"It looks good on you," D told her once more, turning east.

The hymn continued.

Though we may walk
Through the valley of the shadow of Death
We shall fear no harm
For Thou art with us . . .

"Hey!"

Reaching for the longsword that'd been effortlessly snatched away, Iriya looked at the culprit.

"A sword doesn't suit a bride," D said.

Sighing, Iriya blurted out something that was hardly appropriate, given the way she was dressed: "You've left me completely naked!" Quietly gazing at D, she slipped her hand under his left arm. "As a result —you'll have to protect me."

As the two of them started to walk down the sidewalk, a trio of beauticians popped out of the beauty parlor, and they could only watch in stunned silence as the pair went by.

"That's just—beautiful!" they said in voices that were practically sighs after the backs of the pair were only a distant blur.

The hymn rang out up ahead. It was borne on the wind.

The boards of the sidewalk creaked beneath the pair's feet, and every time there was a step up, Iriya had to lift the hem of her dress.

When they came to the end of the sidewalk and stepped down to the ground, the clouds broke apart, sending a single beam of light down on the pair.

The crowd stirred. Voices clamored in admiration. For an instant, they dreamed of beauty. They didn't awake from that dream until the pair arrived at the site of the groundbreaking. A platform had been set up in front of the framework for the schoolhouse, and Lazlo's mother was leading the choir.

Headed for the platform to the left, Lazlo was the first to notice the pair. He let out a gasp as he froze stiff. On noticing his reaction, about thirty people in attendance turned one after another in a chain reaction, with Lazlo's mother the last to be stunned.

After not moving a muscle for almost ten full seconds, finally the teacher began, "Everyone . . . On this auspicious wall-raising day . . . we have another cause for celebration, due to the arrival of this lovely pair . . . My . . . How gorgeous . . . It's like a dream, isn't it?"

No one noticed the sadness in the teacher's tone.

"So kind of you to come. Congratulations to you both. Have you ever seen such a powerful groom or lovely bride?"

He clapped his hands. The sound spread through the crowd, with the applause of countless pairs of hands rising in the light that spilled from between the clouds.

Something glistened in Iriya's eye.

Just then there was an angry shout of "Stop your damn clapping!"

A rough-looking man on the other side of fifty had stepped in front of Iriya. Though many of the participants were just passing through, by the look of his clothes it seemed he was from town. The man jabbed a knobby finger toward Iriya's face, shouting, "A bride? Don't make me laugh! See, I know her. I seen it with my own two eyes, when she lopped the heads off three guys even younger than she is in one go!"

The man's voice quavered, and even his finger shook.

"You remember that, missy? It was about six months back, in a town in the western Frontier called Trinidad. I was in the bar having a drink when you followed them kids in! They were covered in blood, and you were clean as a whistle. The three of 'em asked the bartender and the customers for help. Some folks tried to step in, but you just pummeled 'em like it was nothing. Then you beheaded two of the boys. And the third was on his knees, begging for his life. Had his hands folded together like this, asked you to spare him, said it'd break his parents' hearts. He was even engaged to be married—but you didn't show him no mercy. So then, get this, you walked out of there carrying the three heads. Blood was still spraying from the damn bodies!"

There the man paused his accusations to catch his breath.

Iriya didn't say a word. There was neither pain nor conflict to be found in her pale, beautiful features. But the raggedly breathing man

and the sword scar on his right cheek seemed to be in strangely sharp relief.

"Wait just a minute, Caleb," Lazlo's mother said. "I've heard this woman's a Hunter. Isn't there a chance she had good reason for slaying those three boys? What do you have to say about it, Miss Iriya?"

Smiling, Iriya said, "Thank you." She immediately turned around. "It's a common-enough tale, D—let's go."

"Are you going to run?"

"Listen, you mustn't run," Lazlo called out to her. "You should address these charges. If you're clear of them, we won't stop you. However, if you had a reason for fighting them—if it was justified—you need to tell us about it. Isn't that the duty of any upstanding person?"

"That's right," his mother said.

"Justified," Iriya murmured. "If I had to say one way or the other, there's more toward me being in the clear. But too much talking tires me out."

Iriya was about to walk off, but she halted. D's hand was on her elbow.

"D?"

"It seems she was justified—though that's a word I haven't heard in a very long time."

For a second, Iriya made a move as if to jerk free of D's hand while she glared at the Hunter's face, but then she relented. Giving D's hand a light tap so he'd release her, she headed toward the man named Caleb. The man averted his gaze. He hadn't expected a return volley.

"Those three were frauds," Iriya said clearly. "They'd rough themselves up and then go around asking people for help—and they'd already got two Hunters killed that way. But if I'd explained that to everyone back then, you think they would've believed me? Though that's hardly what this is about, is it?"

Iriya aimed her finger at the man's cheek.

"You were waiting for me on the edge of town, weren't you? Told me that if I didn't want you spreading rumors about how I'd murdered them that day, I was gonna be your bitch. Wasn't that scar on your cheek your reward for trying to jump me?"

"Sh-shut your damn mouth! Who the hell would believe you? All of you—you know me! I'm from right here in town! Don't listen to no damn Hunter vagabond."

"Stop it, Caleb," said a strong female voice from atop the platform. "Now you're the one under suspicion. Is what she said true?"

"C'mon, Mrs. Lazlo!" He pointed at Iriya, preparing fresh abuse.

"Enough, Caleb," said the sheriff as he stepped from the crowd. "It so happens we got word from the Trinidad sheriff's office about that incident. It's like the girl says. Okay, back to your home. You two get going, too."

Taking Iriya by the arm, D turned around. As they started to walk away side by side, behind them a voice shouted, “Screw with me, will you, bitch?”

Drawing the revolver from his hip, Caleb steadied the weapon with both hands as he took aim.

“Stop!” the sheriff shouted, going for the gun on his hip.

A horizontal glint of silver split the field of view of those present. A hiltless blade thin as a willow leaf had mercilessly slashed through Caleb’s carotid artery. The Huntress had kept a concealed weapon.

Blood spurted out forcefully to assail Iriya’s dress—and a wall of black intercepted it. D’s coat. It stopped the bright blood, protecting her spotless outfit.

“D . . .”

“Let’s go.”

Iriya’s right hand was still extended toward the man. Without even bothering to look at her, D gave her a tap on the shoulder.

The crowd was frozen. Facing them, Iriya bowed her head.

“Goodbye—and thank you.”

No one responded to Iriya’s parting words. The crowd saw only death.

As they left, D said, “It was self-defense, sheriff. No need to take a statement.”

The light was once more concealed behind the clouds. As the pair of melancholy figures walked off into the gray world, the hymn continued to echo from on high.

We shall not veer from Thy path
The path Thou hast shown us . . .

The Village of Those Who Wait

chapter 5

I

Once the pair had gone about three-quarters of a mile from town, a chain of rugged mountains and the remains of what appeared to be a factory came into view beneath the sea of clouds.

"What's that?" Iriya asked, gesturing with one hand.

"Why, it's the ruins of an iron mill," the hoarse voice replied.

"Pretty creepy place. If I were a Noble, I'd live somewhere like that!"

"Great idea," the voice said with a mocking laugh.

Iriya was glaring at D's left hand when she heard—

"*D* . . ."

His name repeated over and over, like an echo.

D turned in a certain direction. Though the voice had seemed to rain down from heaven above, he'd determined at once where it came from.

"Seems someone has business with me. Stay right here."

"I'm going, too!"

"I thought you had a pressing engagement."

Not giving the flummoxed Iriya so much as a backward glance, D gave a kick to the flanks of his cyborg horse.

Precisely five minutes later, he returned. The voice had not ceased calling his name.

D turned toward the ruined factory. It was Iriya they were after.

Still on horseback, he passed through the entranceway. Death filled the sprawling institution. Enormous blast furnaces and conveyor belts for carrying ore had long since stopped operating, and Death, in the guise of Time, had nestled the whole place under its black wings. D searched for a sign of life. Less than two seconds later, he found it.

Beneath a skylight in the great ceiling hung a room that seemed to serve as some kind of surveillance center, and before it stood figures in green fatigues. There were two of them. And between them were Iriya and Meeker!

"We've got 'em both!" the figure on the right called out. "The name's Gathlin Rhoda, bounty hunter. And this here's my partner Rin Shikou —'Woody Deathspark' to his friends."

He pointed to the man on the opposite side of the hostages.

"To be perfectly frank, we've got no beef with you, but if we grabbed the girl, you were sure to follow. So, that being the case, we decided to take you out quick. Now be a good boy and die for us!"

"I'm sorry, D," Iriya apologized in a dejected tone. "As soon as you

left, they showed up with Meeker. They grabbed him from the teacher's place on the way here."

"We'd been waiting in town since yesterday. So we borrowed ourselves a spybird and kept an eye on you with a high-def camera from an altitude of about thirty thousand feet. We saw you call at the teacher's house and had a real good idea what you were jawing about. Hell, I knew using the brat probably wouldn't stop you, but it'd work on the girl. And I reckoned the girl would work on you."

Drawing a dagger from his belt, Gathlin put it to Iriya's throat.

"I'm right, ain't I? If you value their lives, throw down your sword."

D was gazing at Iriya.

The body of the man so sure of his victory jolted faintly. Gathlin looked down at the left side of his chest and the stark needle protruding from it. From the spot on the ground where D stood to his own position was a distance of roughly two hundred yards as the crow flies. The seasoned bounty hunter hadn't sensed anything as he was run right through the heart—a testament to the skill of the young man known as D.

Still, the man that Gathlin had called Rin was a veteran bounty hunter, too. He'd been pinning Meeker with one hand, but now he drew the boy nearer, wrapping his arm around Meeker's neck as he should've done from the very start. Or maybe he should have put a knife to his hostage the way his partner had.

Before the boy's little face turned purple from the constricted flow of blood, Iriya's form sailed into the air above the pair. When she landed without a sound, the bounty hunter's body collapsed at her feet. The dagger buried in the top of his head was one Iriya had taken from Gathlin.

As Iriya raced over, Meeker leapt into her open arms.

"You're okay, aren't you?"

Meeker nodded.

At the time of the ceremony at the school, the boy had suddenly grown sleepy in one of the rooms at Lazlo's house. When he woke up, he was being held prisoner in the factory.

"Let's go."

Taking Meeker by the hand, Iriya was just about to walk away when a murderous intent of the fiercest kind prickled the back of her neck. Pushing Meeker down and leaping off to the right, Iriya executed a flip before straightening up, at which point the ash-gray figure that'd sailed over her head was standing right in front of her.

"It can't be . . ."

Iriya was gripped by a shock akin to terror.

Still expressionless, Rin Shikou seized the dagger stuck in his head and pulled it free. As if a switch had been thrown, his head sank down into his torso, while at the same time a lump of approximately the same

shape jutted from between his thighs. It was the face that'd just vanished. No, not just the face but the entire head, now free from injury.

"This is the real me," he said. "What you stabbed was just a growth. It's been a burden to me all my life, but just now it saved my bacon. I can do a few tricks too—here's the first."

Pulling back in to avoid the dagger Iriya had hurled at it, the true head popped up from the top next. Suddenly it split lengthwise, and a massive quantity of liquid fountained from it, shooting high into the air. It rained down on both Iriya, who'd made a great leap out of the way, and Meeker, who was lying on the ground.

The stunned Iriya was prompted to cry, "What is this—oil?"

"That it is."

Though the voice carried laughter, the face was lacking in emotion. Its mouth opened wide. A tiny flame was visible in its depths.

"You might be able to run, but I'll turn the brat into a torch! Unless you wanna see that, come into the surveillance center."

"What about the boy?"

"I'll hold on to him. So long as you're still against me, it looks like he'll be useful."

"You coward!"

"Is that your professional opinion as a Hunter? Bounty hunters would give a play like this a round of applause!"

A thought unexpectedly shot through Iriya's mind: *D.*

II

At that point, the gorgeous Hunter was already halfway to the top of the stairs to the surveillance deck. His racing footfalls didn't make a sound.

It was as he took his next step that he sensed danger. Left hand on the rail, he threw himself into the air—and only D could've detected the attacker coming at him from behind out of thin air. A silvery arc was limned. The slash the Hunter made while in midair barely missed, and the thing flew back the way it'd come.

"An attack drone," said the hoarse voice, seeming to issue from the handrail. "It flies at Mach 2—faster than your blade! Someone's gotta be controlling it."

As she headed for the surveillance center, Iriya glanced at Gathlin's corpse. It knocked the wind out of her. Gathlin was dead. That was for certain. She knew as much from seeing the man's death throes. However, something was moving—his right hand. He was lying with his arm stretched in front of him, but his wrist was raised, and his five fingers were making intricate movements. Even on closer inspection, they seemed to be doing no more than tapping the floor at random. Yet to Iriya, it looked like something else. To her, they seemed to be

controlling something.

"Here it comes!" the hoarse voice snapped.

Its words were replaced by a strange slicing sound, and then D fell toward the ground like a beautiful black stone. A black shooting star followed behind him. No doubt it intended to intercept D in midair. However, before it could, something fell from above to cover it. D's left hand, detached at the wrist!

Its balance upset, the drone began to decelerate from its supersonic speed. At that instant, the tip of D's blade shot up from below—impaling both the drone and his own hand. At the same time, D fell flat against the concrete. He immediately got up again and swung his sword. His left hand and the attack drone hit the floor.

"You're a real tyrant," the left hand kvetched. The stab wound was rapidly fading. "I go to all that trouble of figuring out its speed and direction so I can land on it, and you turn me into shish kebab! Without so much as a thought about all we've been through together."

Perhaps the left hand was just a complainer by nature, because as D looked up at the surveillance center he paid no heed to the grumbles about how cruel the world was or how he must have a death wish. He noticed something was falling over them like rain from above.

"Oil?" the left hand cried, and just then, a small flame sparked in the surveillance deck. Covered by what had become a rain of fire, D's body became a torch burning at thousands of degrees.

Once D had thudded to the ground and the flames enveloping him had faded, three figures looked down at him from the stairs.

"Dhampir or not, there's no way he could stand three thousand degrees of flaming oil."

At Rin Shikou's words, Meeker clung tighter to Iriya.

"It's okay."

That was all Iriya said. The indestructibility of dhampirs, with their Noble blood, was quite well established. But flames burning at three thousand degrees would char him right down to the bone. In fact, the fallen D wasn't moving, and oily black smoke billowed from him.

"That takes him out of the way," Rin said, breathing a sigh of relief. His eyes blazed with desire as he looked at Iriya. "I've gotta get you to my employer before the day is out. He's waiting in an abandoned village called Vinmel about six miles from here. Don't drag your feet."

Iriya and Meeker were still soaked with oil, and a flame danced in Rin's maw.

"Got that? Let's get a move on," Iriya told Meeker, turning her back to the bounty hunter and briskly heading toward the door.

"Wait. Where are you going?" Rin asked, teeth bared in surprise and anger.

Over her shoulder the girl replied, “You’re a fool not to know what a dhampir can do.”

“What are you—”

Suddenly, fear lanced Rin’s heart and he tottered, his body bisected lengthwise. His lips, now split down the middle, trembled as he said, “A Noble . . . would’ve burned to death . . . How . . . ?”

“See, this guy’s human.”

Before the hoarse voice had finished its reply, Rin’s body opened like a folding fan, the halves arcing to either side to hit the floor.

Iriya gazed intently at D as he sheathed his sword. She’d held Meeker’s face against her belly so he wouldn’t look, but now she relinquished her hold on him.

“Don’t look,” she told the boy, turning his head the other way before she continued. “You’re even better than I’ve heard—you don’t have a drop of blood on your blade! I get the impression you could slice someone open, and they might not even notice for two or three days.”

“You familiar with Vinmel?” D asked flatly.

Iriya somehow managed to adjust her tone, saying, “I’ve heard about it. I’m pretty sure it’s what they call ‘The Village of Those Who Wait.’ ”

“Oh, so that’s where that is?” the hoarse voice suddenly said, and Iriya stared at D’s left hand. She gave an unsettled nod.

“That’s right. One of the last ‘mystery spots’ left on the Frontier. There was a village there once, but they say no one knows what it really is.”

“Well, that Noble mustn’t value his life much if he’d pick that place for a meet-up. Probably planned on getting rid of the bounty hunters,” the hoarse voice declared in a tone so crusty its face, if it’d had one, would have been wearing a look of skepticism. “First Mitterhaus—and now this one seems pretty stuck on you, too. Any idea why?” the hoarse voice inquired.

“Nope,” Iriya replied, looking D straight in the eye. “I’d sure like to know, too. But all that aside, what are we supposed to do about the kid?” Staring down sadly at the little boy, who was still looking the other way, she continued, “If we were to bring him back to Clements, we’d be a good half day late getting to Vinmel. Whoever hired these two might try a different tack. If I want to kill him, I’d better set out on time. Or would you be willing to bring the boy back to Clements for me, D?”

Two pairs of eyes were trained on Meeker.

A few minutes later they were off. The boy had responded to the warrior woman’s query with a grin that made it clear there was only one possible answer: “I’m going with you.”

“Well met,” said the shadowy voice that flowed from the darkness. It had the ring of a man who’d known the pride and privilege of a ruler

since the day he was born—the voice of a Noble. “So good of you to bring the woman. I shall give you your reward. Come.”

He was brief and to the point.

The mounted figure beside Iriya rode forward.

“Your attire has changed, has it not?” said the Noble.

“It got sliced up,” the figure replied.

“Remove your scarf.”

Even in the darkness, the Noble’s eyes could make out the other figure distinctly.

Without a moment’s hesitation, the figure pulled down the gray scarf that covered his face from the nose down.

“Rin Shikou was the name, was it not?”

The figure nodded in the depths of the darkness.

“There can be no mistaking the voice or the face. Bring me the girl.”

A black-gloved hand seized the reins of the cyborg horse Iriya was on. The two horses started forward as if they were harnessed together.

They were in the central square of the village. The cobblestoned ground fifty yards in diameter was illuminated by moonlight, and lights burned in the surrounding houses.

Lights? But this was the Village of Those Who Wait. Hadn’t its residents long since vanished, leaving a disturbing area where no one lived?

That night, lights burned there.

When they were still a good six feet away, the Noble told them, “Right there.”

Both steeds halted.

In the light from the houses, the gorgeous carriage drawn by a team of four horses stood out. Its black body was ornamented with gold, and it glittered with jewels just as Mitterhaus’s carriage had.

“So, your partner was slain? Well, that matters not. You were pitted against the man known as D. Was he slain as well?”

The source of the voice stood on the right side of the carriage. Wearing a black cape and a hat that resembled a beret, he held in his hand a walking stick topped by a gold tiger with blazing rubies set in its eyes.

The mounted figure shook his head.

“Oh, you failed, then? In that case, you did well to make off with the girl.”

“At the cost of Gathlin’s life,” Rin’s voice replied.

The caped figure shook. On realizing that he was laughing, Rin shifted in the saddle and asked, “Something funny?”

A thread of insanity linked the two shadowy figures.

He was cut off by a different voice.

“What do you plan on doing with me?” Iriya inquired. All her weapons had been taken away, leaving her completely unarmed.

After a brief silence, the Noble replied in a surprised manner, “Do you not know? Then I suppose Mitterhaus died for nothing.”

“I’m avenging my parents and searching for my brothers and sisters who were taken. You don’t need to take me alive, do you, Viscount Albidozen?”

The golden crest that adorned the front of the carriage wasreflected in Iriya’s eyes.

“How right you are. Had we not left you alive that night, we wouldn’t need to go to all this trouble now. That damnable Langlan had to display all the compassion of a human. He alone thought to play the saint, but we would not abide that. At our insistence, it was Langlan himself who drank your blood.”

“Drank?”

Two voices said the same word reflexively. One was Iriya’s, the other —a hoarse one—was so low that even Viscount Albidozen’s ears didn’t catch it.

“Yes. Did you not know? Careless as it may seem, we left you there in the knowledge that, having been bitten by a Noble, you would likely be disposed of by your fellow human scum. To be honest, even now I am astonished. It appears not a mark was left upon you. On hearing rumors of this, we decided to capture you!”

“That’s a lie . . . You’re lying!” Putting her left hand to her neck, Iriya murmured absent-mindedly, “No one drank my blood. I wasn’t bitten by any Noble. See for yourself—there isn’t a mark on me!”

Exposing her pale throat, Iriya thrust it forward. There was a mysterious desperation on her face.

III

“We know your fate far better than you yourself,” Viscount Albidozen laughed. But despite his laughter, doubt was unfurling its black wings in his voice. “Because that is the fate we bestowed on you. You, however, did not accept it. Why? That is what we would learn. Come.”

The viscount beckoned to her.

As if strung with invisible wires, Iriya climbed down from the saddle. Then she paused, closing her eyes and shaking her head.

“Come.”

Once more he beckoned, and Iriya’s resistance broke. This time she approached the viscount with smooth steps, pressing right up against his chest. A cry of surprise rang out. Iriya backed away. Within his cape, a dagger was buried to the hilt in the viscount’s chest. The cry had come from Iriya. The resistance the dagger had met had told her this wasn’t the body of a Noble.

The viscount smiled without a sound. “I considered myself well versed in the ways of humans, but your stupidity truly leaves me at a loss for words. I have seen through your act, your ploy. D, though that is

a remarkable disguise, it is all for naught. No matter how you might cover yourself with makeup, you shall fool no one—as you are too beautiful."

"D!"

Iriya extended her left hand. The instant she caught the sword tossed by the man who wore Rin's face, her blade whizzed from its sheath in a silver flash, sank into the viscount at the nape of his neck, and exited through his right side.

"Though you display remarkable skill in putting a spell on yourself to resist my control, for the past three millennia it has been my general policy not to appear in public. Particularly when dealing with humans; merely breathing the same air as them makes me feel dirty. Child, you said your goal is to have vengeance and to search for your siblings, did you not? I did, in point of fact, take in one of your brothers. And out of admiration for your skill and bravery in piercing the heart of the great Albidozen, proxy or not, I give you fair warning: It would be best that you not meet. For your elder brother, and for you."

"Where is he? Where's my brother Yan?"

"You have been warned. If you still desire to see him, remain here. He shall be along presently."

As the viscount said that, the upper half of his body slid off along the diagonal cut and dropped to the ground. The lower half, with its firmly planted feet, soon buckled at the knees and fell. Iriya bent over and touched it.

"It's a doll made of organic cells!" she exclaimed. "I've heard busy Nobles used them as stand-ins at party or government meetings."

Iriya's blade flashed out in an arc again, and then the gorgeous carriage collapsed, too.

"Both copies—cheap, but effective," said the hoarse voice in aleisurely tone.

Its words were overlaid by a voice of iron.

"Mount up. We're going," D told the girl. "We're the ones Those Who Wait are waiting for. Hurry up."

Iriya bounded into the saddle, and the two steeds started to gallop off. Behind them, a low, doleful chorus arose.

"*Come back!*"

The horses halted. No, their legs actually continued to pound the ground. They definitely seemed to be moving forward. They must have been. And yet, in opposition to the most basic laws of physics, the two steeds didn't advance in the slightest. Why, not only had they stopped advancing, but they were actually moving backward!

D had already noticed the figures behind them standing at front doors and windows, beckoning to them.

"What the hell?" Iriya cried, desperately working the reins and kicking her steed's flanks as she ground her teeth together.

Five thousand years ago, all the men in the village had vanished, never to return. The remaining women could do nothing but wait, and before long stories of the travelers who passed through Vinmel but didn't come back began to reach city offices and sheriff's departments. Though Vinmel was no more than the ruins of a village by that point, the investigators who went there were left breathless by the scene that greeted them: much to their surprise, life went on as normal in the rotting, collapsing homes. The men from that party found themselves waking up with, breaking bread with, and even chatting with wives, daughters, and mothers who'd been reduced to bleached bones or mummified remains. Of course, these men weren't their real husbands or fathers, and their days spent with the dead left them as emaciated as corpses, and it's said that only a combination of physical and magical treatment finally got them to speak the truth.

For more than a century after that the village of Vinmel had been behind barricades, off limits permanently. Nevertheless, travelers continued to disappear in its vicinity. Families who'd lost their men waited for them still.

"*Come back to us!*"

The cyborg horses galloped on, yet they were clearly moving backward.

"We're in trouble here," the hoarse voice insisted. "We're up against a whole village. I don't know what the focal point is!"

"Let's try burning down the houses!"

Iriya's right hand dipped into her saddlebags. Pulling out a cylinder roughly the same size as a conventional clip of bullets, she grabbed the ring on one end of it and yanked it off. Slowly counting to three, she twisted around on the horse and let the cylinder fly.

She had considerable strength. A house more than sixty feet behind them erupted in spiteful, oily flames. Iriya's aim was right on the money. Without pausing, she set four buildings gloriously ablaze.

The scenery began flowing past them normally again.

"We did it—we're getting out!"

But Iriya's hopes weren't sustained for more than ten yards.

"We're moving backward again! How come?"

"It's the other houses," said the hoarse voice. "Seems like the whole village must want us to stay."

"I don't have enough incendiaries for that!"

As Iriya cried out, her eyes caught a black form sailing into the air.

"D?"

When the figure in the black coat landed, he slammed into the houses behind them like a demonic gale. As the wind passed the figures standing by the doorways, they lost their heads or were split lengthwise, vanishing.

"That's some incredible swordplay!" Iriya exclaimed, hot blood

racing through every inch of her body. “I think I’ll—”

Iriya leaned forward, about to dismount—and then she noticed something. She was already in front of a house. Less than three feet away, what looked to be a middle-aged housewife was holding the hands of two small boys, and they were all staring at her. The instant Iriya saw their pale, wasted faces, her heart was filled with an indescribable feeling of relief.

Oh, that’s right. She’d returned home. After a long, long journey. She should never leave again. They would all—

“We’ll all live together,” Iriya said, and the other three hugged her.

“You came back, didn’t you?” the woman said, rubbing her cheek against Iriya’s. It felt like ice.

The children joined hands around her waist. The woman clung to her neck.

“But—” the three people began in unison, staring at Iriya. Their eyes were bloodshot, their lips dried and cracked. “You’re not Daddy!”

Their bizarre cries were enough to make Iriya want to cover her ears, but the sadness in them woke the Huntress from her daze. No doubt the wives and children had cried that way the day they’d lost their husbands, their fathers. Every bone in her body creaked. The trio’s six arms—and even some of their legs—began to squeeze Iriya in an attempt to shatter her bones.

“Fake!”

“Impostor!”

“Get out of here!”

The curses that shook her eardrums were even more pathetic. Iriya didn’t feel hatred. Without warning, her mind started to slip away.

Suddenly, the pressure faded. As she drew oxygen into her lungs, she leapt for the opposite side of the street.

The family had turned their backs to Iriya. She could make out a diminutive figure standing just beyond them.

“Meeker?”

Iriya’s startled exclamation was rivaled by cries of delight.

“You’ve come back, my dear!”

“Daddy . . .”

“Daddy . . .”

That was how he appeared to them.

“Miss Iriya, smash the village cornerstone. It’s in the middle of the square! I tried doing it myself, but I’m not strong enough.”

Iriya didn’t need to hear another word. That would be the only way to destroy the evil that infested the village. There was no choice but to get rid of everything, village and all.

The family tried to pounce on Meeker. The boy’s tiny form dashed about, skillfully evading their grip.

“Hurry, Miss Iriya—I’ll be okay!”

As he said that, Iriya kicked off the ground. “D, keep Meeker safe!” she shouted as she ran off.

Her eyes pierced the darkness. She reached the center of the square unmolested.

When a village was formed, a stone monument with the community’s name and the date of its founding was always erected at its center. It was the life of the village, so to speak—some might even call it the place’s soul. Neither Iriya nor D had thought of it, yet the boy had told her to strike at that stone.

“That’s one hell of a kid.”

Iriya raced toward the easily recognizable gravestone-like plinth. Perhaps it was on account of how focused her attention was that she didn’t notice the figure crouched by the village flagpoles a short distance off.

An incendiary charge, she thought, but on reconsideration, her right hand took hold of her sword.

“Don’t!”

The threadbare tone of the woman’s voice stopped the Huntress’s arm.

Iriya turned around.

People filled the square. Hoary-headed crones, weary middle-aged matrons, young ladies, little toddling girls—all female. Women abandoned by their men, left behind to die while waiting for them.

“Please, stop,” a crone said, her body quavering. “If that breaks . . . we’ll . . .”

“We’ll lose even our waiting place,” implored a mother holding a baby.

“My papa won’t be able to come home!”

“Forget them already!” Iriya cried out to the wall of women. “Forget any man who wouldn’t come back—”

Her words broke off there. *Forget it. What’s lost is gone, and it’s never coming back.* Wasn’t that something Iriya herself refused to do?

“If it were you—could you forget?” asked a pale-faced woman of middle age. “Have you ever lost anything? Anything precious?”

“Yes, I have!” Iriya nodded vehemently. “My mother and father were slaughtered by Nobles. Their throats were torn open. My brothers and sisters were bitten, then carried off. Made into servants, I hear. I need to release them all! To drive a stake through their hearts with my own hands!”

“But didn’t you tell us to forget?” a little blond girl said, smiling. She clutched a battered doll. “You should forget them, too. And . . .”

“. . . become one of us,” said the woman cradling an infant. Hers was a gentle voice. “Wait with us—wait for your loved ones to come back.”

Sweet voices filled Iriya’s heart with warm peace, like a false sense of healing. Her sword dropped.

It's easier this way, Iriya heard a distant voice say. It bore a startling resemblance to her own.

The crowd suddenly contracted. Arms beyond numbering reached out to Iriya.

And then—far off, she heard someone call out, "Miss Iriya!" It was Meeker's voice.

As the sense of relief started to swallow up Iriya's mind, the boy's voice formed a hot, focused mass.

I have things to do.

Turning her back to the approaching thicket of pale hands, Iriya moved forward and struck her blade against the stone monument before her.

Wendover Gorge

chapter 6

I

In this era, there were swords that could cut through stone. There were also those that could slice steel. However, they chose their masters. Cutting through stone and slicing steel were skills for an expert. At present, even out on a Frontier choked with warriors and superhuman Hunters, there was no woman who was known to slash through stone.

Now, bringing her blade straight down on the marker, Iriya sliced halfway through it without meeting any real resistance, then brought her arm back again. Suddenly, she realized that everything had ended. Around her were none of Those Who Wait. The lights were out in each of the homes, all of which had become dilapidated ruins.

"Meeker!" the Huntress called out.

"Miss Iriya!" he immediately replied. He was close.

Just as she was about to walk toward his voice, three cyborg horses came into view far down the road. A figure in a black coat rode one, and Meeker was on another. The third was Iriya's steed. They galloped up, and then Meeker jumped down and threw his arms around Iriya's neck. The girl bore his weight through sheer joy.

"You're not hurt, are you?"

"No problem. It was looking bad, but D saved me!"

"Oh, that's right. He was here, too."

The gorgeous Hunter stood quietly before the two of them.

"How'd you know to cut through that stone marker?"

The question made the boy turn and look at D.

"Go ahead and tell us. It was all your doing." Though the Hunter's voice was steely, it somehow seemed gentle.

The boy nodded. Through the darkness, Iriya saw his flush of pride.

"In my dad's room, there were a bunch of really old books. One of 'em was called *Frontier Evils and Their Means of Destruction Based on Oral Tradition*. It was about all kinds of demons and monsters—how to get away from 'em, how to hide from 'em, and even a little bit about how to slay 'em."

"Up till now, no one's known how to get rid of Those Who Wait! That must've been a pretty old book."

"It wasn't really a book. More like a bunch of ratty old papers bound together. My dad made the cover himself."

"Looks like someone was a smart cookie," remarked the hoarse voice. "Your father found all these old scraps and notes and put them

together into a single volume. Any ideas whose notes they were?"

"Yeah, I think . . ." Closing his eyes, Meeker's face took on an adult's grimace. "I'm pretty sure it was Montague—Father Montague Lord Jessun."

"Oh, *him*," the hoarse voice said, seeming satisfied.

"You know him?" Iriya inquired.

"He was an eccentric holy man who roamed all over the Frontier about a century ago collecting all kinds of old legends and stories. But before he could put them all together in a single volume, he had a heart attack and died. Since he was staying at an inn for merchants when he croaked, his valuable possessions were gone before his relatives or apprentices could get there, and I heard that, aside from a small portion, his notes and other writings had scattered to the four winds. So, the squirt's father got his hands on 'em, eh?"

"You'll come in handy. You just saved me—and D, too."

"That's right," D said.

Iriya gave the boy, so happy and proud he was frozen in place, a look of exceeding tenderness.

"And so another legend falls—let's go!" D said.

When they were just shy of the village gates, Iriya pressed her hand against her chest and halted her horse.

"Oh, no—I wonder if I could've dropped it? Go on ahead."

"What is it?" Meeker inquired with concern.

Giving him a wry grin, she replied, "A present from my mom—a bitty little pendant. The chain must've snapped while I was fighting. It's probably no use, but I'll try to find it anyway. I'll catch up with you soon."

"We'll wait fifteen minutes," D said matter-of-factly.

"Roger that."

Wheeling her steed around, the warrior woman galloped off into the depths of the darkness.

D and Meeker decided to wait by the entrance. The gates were rotting away.

After waiting fifteen minutes, D murmured in a tone so faint Meeker couldn't hear, "She's gone, isn't she?"

"That Noble?" Even the hoarse voice sounded tense.

"Viscount Albidozen, most likely."

"But how'd he manage it?"

"Ask him."

"Hmm," the hoarse voice groaned. "If he was in the village, he would've had to deal with Those Who Wait, too. You suppose he worked his spell from outside?"

"Listen closely," D said.

"I don't get it," the hoarse voice replied several seconds later. "They're already three miles away. So—" The hoarse voice buttoned its

lip, but quickly continued, “Oh, here comes something else!”

D’s left hand shot out. There was a dull thud, and his fist grasped a single silver arrow.

“There’s a thread tied to the head of this arrow. Seems like you’ve got all kinds of handy acquaintances.”

Ignoring the taunting tone of the hoarse voice, D followed the thread so fine it would’ve been imperceptible to the naked eye, then turned to the boy.

“The highway’s to the west. Is there a mountain or a hill along the way?”

Furrowing his brow for a moment, Meeker replied, “Sure. About a mile and a quarter up ahead, there are four hills.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I read maps of the Frontier.”

“You don’t mean to tell me you’ve got ’em memorized, do you?” the hoarse voice said.

“I do!”

“Little shit,” D’s left hand said, rising.

Using his right hand to pull it back down, D remarked, “It’s like Iriya said. You come in handy.”

“Don’t I, though?”

“Get on behind me. We’re in for a rough ride. Your tail end will be killing you.”

“Yes, sir!”

Meeker gladly transferred to the Hunter’s steed, and leaving the other two steeds there, D gave a kick to his horse’s flank—and with a toss of its mane, the cyborg horse broke into a gallop.

Though from the outside the carriage appeared to be of average size, the interior was strangely roomy. Iriya found herself resting on the floor of a room that looked to be about eighteen hundred square feet. Her arms and legs were immobilized. Though her body told her she was bound by some sort of fine thread, she couldn’t see it, no matter how she strained her eyes. Yet the pain of the thread biting into her and the deep welts it left on her skin told her it was no illusion. From the faint shaking, she determined that the carriage was still in motion.

Beyond a few sofas and tables, a wide staircase rose in an elegant spiral. Iriya no longer found it odd that a carriage that looked from the outside like it would have room for just four occupants had a second story. As she was thinking about how she was going to escape, a figure in a black cape came down the stairs.

“Send another dummy?” she asked. Iriya wasn’t the least bit cowed.

“I’m the genuine article.”

The caped figure came over. With the pale skin unique to the

Nobility and red eyes that burned in the darkness, he had a slender frame that projected a particularly cruel image.

"The horses that draw this carriage are unusually swift. You should know we are already more than a dozen miles from the village. Not even the Hunter known as D could possibly catch up to us."

"Sooner or later this shit heap of a wagon will have to stop. And when it does, you'll have a fight on your hands. In fact, I don't even need to wait for D. I'll dispose of you myself. Okay, then. Cut me free."

"Hmph. It would appear you are merely capable of making threats, human. And yet—"

Resting his hand against his slender chin, the viscount stared thoughtfully at Iriya. Huntress though she was, the look was unsettling enough to freeze her solid. The viscount quickly bent over and gazed at the nape of Iriya's neck. Though she tried to resist, her body was still bound tight. Iriya was seized by the fear of those vile fangs piercing her pale throat.

Reaching for her trembling chin and examining her scrupulously, seemingly in spite of himself the viscount murmured, "Hmm. It's as if we never bit you. Who could do such a thing . . ."

"It's just your imagination," Iriya spat venomously. "No one bit me. If you want to, go ahead and try biting me now."

"Yes," the viscount said with a nod, and Iriya thought, *Damn it!* "That would be the best way to resolve this question. And I must thank you for making the suggestion."

He smirked, stark fangs gleaming behind his lips.

"Save your thanks for your son in hell."

"Regrettably, I have neither a wife nor a son. Therefore, I was able to join my compatriots, night in and night out, for the delightful sport of feasting on human blood. As I did when we called on your home."

"You mean to say . . . that was a *game* for you?" Iriya asked in a voice like a crone's.

"What else would it be? Killing your parents and abducting your siblings was merely a caprice! There was no need to tear open their throats, and we hardly wanted for servants."

"Give me back my father . . ." Iriya's voice trembled. A torrent of almost insane rage surged through her supple form, trying to transform it into wrought iron. "Give me back my mother . . . and my brothers . . . Give me back my little sister . . ."

And what should the Noble do but nod?

"Very well. In Vinmel I told you as much. Now I shall reunite you. Yan!"

The viscount's grin broadened. His right arm rose, his cape hiding the staircase from Iriya's view. Peering into her eyes, which had become vacant the instant she heard Yan's name, the Nobleman grinned viciously. His cape quickly came down again.

II

At the foot of the stairs stood a young man, short but sturdily built. He was dressed in rough old clothes and sported close-cropped hair—for a second, Iriya thought her brother must've just come home from a hunting trip. The kiss of the Nobility had prevented the years from changing him.

"For your benefit, I've had him don the same clothes he wore that evening. Here you are, brother and sister, reunited by chance after all these years. We have plenty of time. By all means, please get reacquainted."

A heartbeat later, Iriya realized she'd been set free. As she leapt to her feet with lightning speed, she saw the caped figure vanish into the depths of the darkness.

"Big brothers and little sisters are a thing for the world of humans. I look forward to seeing what becomes of the bond between you now that one of you is a servant of the Nobility!"

"Iriya . . ."

The mere sound of his voice left Iriya feeling dizzy.

"Yan . . ."

You've gotta pull yourself together, a tiny voice whispered to her, but its tone was also vacant and dazed.

"Iriya—you're all grown up, aren't you?"

Yan broke into a grin. It was the same warm and dependable smile she remembered from days of old.

Her older brother had carried a weapon as heavy as their father's since the time he was ten and used it to bag game just as big, too. Taciturn by nature, he was warned by their mother that folks would take him for a mute, but with his evening drink he would give them a friendly grin. And every time he did, Iriya realized it was a treasure.

"What've you been doing all this time? Are Mom and Dad doing well?"

"No," Iriya replied, shaking her head. "What are you talking about? The night the Nobles came, their throats were ripped open! They're dead! You, Pol, Chulos, and Maggie all got bitten and were carried off. I was the only one they didn't bite!"

"That . . . is a lie," Yan said sadly.

"Why do you say that? It's true! I don't remember it happening. And look at my throat—there's not a mark on it, is there?"

"I saw it, Iriya—I watched the great Count Langlan drink your blood. We'd all been bitten already. You were the last. And then they carried all of us off. If Count Langlan hadn't told them to leave you there, you would've met the same fate we did."

"No. You must be remembering it wrong, Yan."

"You're the one who's wrong."

Yan gazed patiently at his little sister.

"What's with your eyes—why are they red? I'll tell you what happened, okay? Just don't look at me."

"Iriya."

"Afterward, I was rescued by a passing witch doctor. He took me on the road with him. With my whole family bitten by Nobles and taken away, I couldn't very well stay in that village. After all, there was no saying you wouldn't all come and attack the place. Then I learned how to use swords and other weapons, and I set out on a journey to find all of you. I wanted to rescue you—if you hadn't been made servants of the Nobility yet. If I was too late, I would drive a wooden stake through your hearts before you could hurt anyone else."

"Who taught you how to use those weapons?"

"Who? Different people!"

"Before you slew Baron Mitterhaus, you took care of Count Zegreib, Duke Schultz, and Baron Luzbon. And you had to deal with Pol, Maggie, and Shezk. Quite an accomplishment. I can imagine what Mom and Dad would call you—*sibling slayer*."

"I didn't have a choice," Iriya protested.

The shock had been surprisingly faint. From the instant her blade slid into the heart of the first she'd dealt with—Maggie—all consciousness of their blood ties had been transformed into something else entirely. Iriya had since stained her hands with the blood of two more siblings.

"Being servants of the Nobility, you have to do whatever you're told. And I had to stop that."

"And now it's my turn?" Yan's smile broadened. His meaty hands grabbed hold of Iriya's shoulders.

"I know how you feel about me," her older brother said.

What's he talking about?

Terror squirmed somewhere in Iriya's heart.

"I knew perfectly well how you viewed me. But there was no way I could accept it. After all, we're brother and sister."

His rugged face drew closer. In the old days, he'd often smelled of sweat. Now, however, he carried the stench of blood.

"But things are different now. You don't have to hide anything, Iriya. I like you, too."

"Yan, don't talk craziness."

"Why can't brothers and sisters be together? Who decided that? That's a human rule, isn't it?"

Before Iriya's brother's face approached hers, his powerful chest crushed against her breasts. His waist melded with hers, and her brother's hands slid from her shoulders to her back.

Iriya couldn't shut her eyes, which saw those of Yan as they glowed burning red, like coals. Iriya's right hand went for the dagger on her hip. It was still there—not because Viscount Albidozen hadn't noticed it, but

rather because the Nobleman considered Iriya to be a slip of a girl who posed no threat to him. Her weapons had been left alone, and even her longsword had been placed on the floor by her side.

"Iriya."

Her brother sought her lips. Iriya didn't refuse him. Even when her brother reached for the hand she used to grip her dagger, she didn't fight him. Her brother was far more passionate than she'd imagined back in those distant days. He sucked against Iriya's lips so hard it seemed he'd pull them right off, and their teeth made a noise as they banged together. And then—

There was a scream that fell short of words. Yan leapt back, bright blood gushing from between the fingers pressed to his mouth. His tongue had been bitten clean off. As he stood there frozen with surprise, a dagger plunged into his throat, and while he staggered backward, Iriya pounced on him with her sword in one hand—and split her own brother from the top of the head right down to the crotch. As Yan fell without a word, his eyes weren't those of a brother looking out for his little sister. As if to escape those eyes crazed by loathing and hunger, Iriya made a second swipe, this one from the side—and her older brother, split crosswise from the base of his throat, flew into the air. Still breathing easily, Iriya raced over to the shuddering body, reversing her grip on the longsword and dealing the final blow to the still-pulsating heart.

"This comes as a surprise," said Viscount Albidozen, his voice drifting out from nowhere in particular, yet Iriya remained facing straight ahead, her face a mask devoid of all emotion as she sheathed her blade. "I would have thought your feeling for your brother would trump your pride as a Hunter, but I see how callously you cut him down. Your great accomplishments up until this point are understandable. Another notch for your belt, sibling slayer. Acting dazed and compliant, then biting his tongue off—whoever could have taught you such a tactic?"

Ignoring him, Iriya mouthed a farewell prayer, then turned to the staircase.

There, on the landing halfway up, stood Viscount Albidozen.

"Is that how you put your relations at peace? Who did you learn this from, and who will you pass it on to? You are a deeply troubled girl. However, I admire your resolve! Your cold-bloodedness. Be mine, child. Then you shall be able to call on the true power that the gods or whoever granted you."

He wasn't joking. The look in the viscount's eye was the same he'd give any beloved Noblewoman.

"Look into my eyes—that is what I would normally tell you, but you were unperturbed by the Noble's gaze of your brother. It would seem I have no choice but to resort to force. Child, are you prepared to do battle with Viscount Albidozen?"

“Come and get it,” Iriya responded with a terrible gleam in her eye.

The carriage was approaching an old suspension bridge. It wasn’t one of the Nobles’ making. About a century earlier, this six-hundred-foot bridge had been designed by humans and fashioned from wood, steel, and cables. The iron plates and bolts supporting it were rusted and loose, leaving it in such poor shape some joked about whether it would support the weight of a crossing baby. What would happen when the Noble’s carriage rode onto it? Or if it were struck with a single arrow, for that matter?

A silver arrow scored a direct hit on a floorboard near the center of the bridge while the carriage was still a hundred yards shy of it. An arrow made of silver. Just one. Who would’ve thought it capable of such destruction?

The instant the arrow found its mark, all the nuts and bolts securing the bridge shot into the air. And that was just the start. It was unclear what kind of damage the bridge had received, but it was now pulled back in the direction the arrow had come from, and a few seconds later it plunged toward the rapids three hundred feet below, twisting and turning like a dying serpent—even though no one was present to witness its throes.

It was about ten minutes later that D caught up with the carriage, halted some twenty yards from the cliff. No matter what the speed of his cyborg horse might’ve been, it was hard to believe how quickly he’d erased the carriage’s lead of a dozen miles.

Going straight over to the carriage, D checked the interior and promptly returned.

“She’s not there,” he told Meeker, who was crestfallen.

Before the boy could ask where she’d gone, the hoarse voice said, “A terrific amount of energy was unleashed here. Before we arrived, a fight of some sort took place.”

D looked around.

What had happened? The rocky cliffs and forests to either side of the road had been wiped away, leaving flat land for as far as the eye could see. The plain was so vast, anyone who hadn’t known about the existence of the cliffs or forests would’ve thought about building a home there.

“How much would this take?” D asked. He was wondering how much energy would be required to work such a transformation on the place.

“Roughly fifty billion—” the hoarse voice began, but then a prismatic mist blew their way, like a rainbow borne on the wind. In front of D on

the ground and Meeker on horseback the mist changed shape, swayed, and in the blink of an eye resolved into a pair of human figures.

"Miss Iriya?"

"Albidozen."

In response to the cries from Meeker and the hoarse voice, the man in the cape made an elegant bow. Surprisingly enough, Meeker bowed his head in return. The Nobleman's actions were so refined the boy couldn't help himself.

"So good of you to come all this way," the viscount told D and Meeker. From the sincerity in his voice, it seemed he meant every word. "However, the girl has kept me from doing much."

He gazed lovingly at the pale visage of Iriya, who stood like a zombie by his side. Suddenly, his eyes filled with naked hate and his gaze shot to the plain to his left.

"Wherever can you be, you hateful yet remarkable archer? By all means, take another shot once I have dealt with this hindrance."

"The bridge was shot out?" D said, seeming to glean the truth.

"With but a single arrow. My driver and the guard both plunged into the ravine below."

"Then you can go and join them."

A silver flash shot up from D's back. The blade came out without a single wasted movement.

Powder in all the colors of the rainbow flew through the air. The second the blade had split his head, both the viscount and Iriya had turned to dust.

"Albidozen's sorcery? Watch yourself," the hoarse voice said.

"Stay right there," D told Meeker, and then the Hunter shut his eyes. He was searching for a sign of the Nobleman.

"Here I am. Right here."

Once again the prismatic fog drifted, taking the form of the Noble and the Huntress. Straight ahead of D—and to his right and left, and behind him—the unmistakable image of the pair took shape while the viscount laughed scornfully. "Not even the superkeen senses of a dhampir can see through my pack of duplicates."

Now more than twenty viscounts were undoing the top buttons of the same number of Iriyas and stroking the pale throats that were exposed. The Iriyas groaned in a low voice. For all its loathing, the tone also carried an inescapable ring of desire.

"D . . ."

Though D didn't move in response to her moan, when the viscounts charged at him from all sides, his right arm flourished his blade, reducing each and every one of the attackers to dust.

"Quite an accomplishment. I see my duplicates don't return to normal. So, this is the man they call D?" one of the viscounts exclaimed, unmistakable fear and admiration in his voice, and then he dashed

toward the cliff with Iriya in his arms.

"Watch yourself!" the hoarse voice urged.

Albidozen stood stock still, unable to flee any further, while the Hunter's blade rose to strike him down—but at that instant, D felt a change in the ground beneath his feet. He'd stepped out into empty space! Without saying a word and with his sword still raised, D was swallowed by the darkness.

III

However, as D fell, he thrust his sword into the rockface before him. Perhaps it was a result of his otherworldly pose, or maybe it was D's skill, but the blade sank halfway into the rock, supporting its wielder. But D didn't move after that. With no footing for a leap upward, he was left hanging in midair—literally high and dry, as the saying went.

"You are a stalwart foe," Viscount Albidozen laughed, standing on a rock just shy of the edge of the cliff a scant fifteen feet above the Hunter. Iriya was in his arms. "However, you find yourself in quite a fix. You may hang there, helpless as a bagworm, and watch as I make this girl mine."

His lips latched onto her supple neck. Iriya writhed, but when the lips came away, there was no wound there. Apparently it'd been an ordinary kiss.

Although it seemed like the viscount wanted to sink his fangs into her, he sounded somehow dissatisfied as he said, "I was going to take this girl to Kraken's castle. Though at first he intended to kill her and dispatched assassins toward that end, he came to harbor the same doubts that I do and changed his mind. There is something unusual about this girl. She leaves me ill at ease. As a result, I have decided to grant her the blood of the Nobility here and now. Forgive me, Kraken. But you share the anxiety I feel. Now, I will remove the need for it."

His mouth opened wide, and within it gleamed a gruesome pair of fangs. More than anything, it was the blood-crazed look on the Noble's face that spoke of his true intention this time.

Strength flowed into D's right arm. His muscles became iron. His body rose immediately. With nothing but the power of one arm, he propelled himself upward. There was a whistle as the black streak knifed through the darkness—the Hunter had extracted his longsword, as well.

Albidozen bent backward almost reflexively, escaping with just a cut to the end of his nose only because the timing of the blade had been thrown off. The Nobleman backed off a few yards, and on seeing D on top of the cliff, he pressed his accursed lips to the throat of the enthralled Iriya.

Iriya's body stiffened—then relaxed. Her vacant expression was quickly transformed into one of rapturous delight. No matter what a person's state of mind, from the peaks of excitement to the murky

depths of despair, the kiss of the Nobility would put them in a trance.

When the viscount turned and grinned at D, his lips were stained with blood. Licking them, the Nobleman lifted Iriya with the intent to hurl her at the charging Hunter. In his hands, the Huntress's body spun agilely.

"Wha—" the Nobleman grunted and froze in his tracks; Iriya had landed behind him and plunged her dagger through his heart from the back, while D's blade raced forward, bringing with it the cruel crunch of severed vertebrae.

As the viscount's head sailed through the air in a gentle parabola and dropped into the gorge, it rotted away, turning to dust. D looked down at the Noble's equally dusty cape without a word and then crouched by Iriya's side.

"Do you remember now?"

Some time passed before Iriya looked up. Her expression was one of extreme fatigue, and she looked around dazedly, but on noticing the items at her feet, she finally expressed surprise.

"This is Viscount Albidozen's . . . D, did you do that to him?"

D looked down at his left hand.

"She ain't tugging your chain. She's had her memory wiped clean," the hoarse voice said.

Closing her eyes almost as if she'd been wounded, Iriya said, "My memories wiped clean? Did I do something?"

"You slew Albidozen," said D.

"What?" Iriya exclaimed, her face slowly contorting with shock.

"But before you did, he fed on you, though there are no marks on your neck. It's like you were never bitten."

"What do you mean? You're telling me I was bitten, but there's no wound on my throat? You must've seen it wrong, then!"

"Of everything you've said, there's just one name whose meaning remains unclear. It might be tied to your missing memory."

"What name?"

"Alucard."

Iriya squinted her eyes, poring through her memories, but she quickly shook her head.

"So, this Alucard person set it up so that when I destroy a Noble, I lose all memory of it?"

"While you're fighting them, it's not your memories you lose, but your emotions. The memory erasure is so you'll forget that you've been bitten. The human psyche isn't equipped to deal with that shock. Just getting bitten would probably take every last bit of fight out of you."

"In that case, when I'm fighting and slaying Nobles, I wouldn't remember anything, right?"

"That's about the size of it," said the hoarse voice. "But I don't think there's a witch doctor or sorcerer in the world who could keep the kiss

of the Nobility from going into effect. But you say, 'Alucard,' 'Alucard.' "

"D—are we setting out soon?" Iriya inquired, turning a doleful countenance toward the Hunter.

"It'll be dawn soon. We'll wait till then."

"In that case, come with me. My brother's remains are in the carriage."

He was a pile of dust and rotting bones on the floor. Putting them into her big brother's jacket, Iriya left the carriage and went to the edge of the cliff.

"Ashes to ashes," she intoned in a faint voice, her eyes shut. "Dust to dust. Be borne off on the winds, carried with the rain, lost in the ground. Bring forth new trees and new grass, new flowers and new grains. Bring forth new life."

She scattered the dust. The girl watched without expression as her older brother's remains spread like smoke, melting away into the darkness.

"It's done," she told D, and there were no tears in her eyes.

The strength was returning to her stride as she walked toward Meeker, and watching her go, the hoarse voice remarked, "She does away with her own blood, and she ain't even upset about it. That's gotta warp you!"

"In what way?" D asked the hoarse voice.

"If I knew that, it'd save us a lot of trouble. It's lousy for her, but hopefully it'll work out good for us."

As the Hunter walked back to his cyborg horse, Meeker called out to him, "How are we supposed to cross here? Now that the Noble we were chasing's been slain, will we turn back?"

"No, we'll keep going this way."

Looking at D with utter disbelief, Iriya said, "We'll fall!"

Still facing the cliffs on the opposite side, D said, "Load the horse into the back of the carriage. The interior is an area of distorted space. You could fit ten thousand of them in there."

"What'll we do then?"

Giving no reply, D went back into the carriage, then quickly returned with a spool of wire over his shoulder.

"What are you going to do?"

Iriya's voice carried a tone that said, *You can't be serious.*

"The supports are still there."

In the darkness, the black iron supports that'd secured the web of cables at both ends of the suspension bridge still towered on either cliff. Walking over to the brink of the cliff with the massive spool of steel wire, which must've weighed hundreds of pounds, D faced the opposite cliff and uncoiled about five yards of wire that he began to twirl over his head like a lasso.

Iriya muttered to herself something about how he must be joking,

but her remarks were obliterated by a forceful whistle in the wind. And it wasn't the whispering of a breeze; it was the angry howls of a gale. Even before Iriya and Meeker could react, the cyborg horses backed away.

D's right hand shot out, and the two-millimeter wire flew like a javelin to a support on the opposite side, which it coiled around as if it were a snake. It was a distance of over six hundred feet. Giving a good tug to test its strength, D drew his sword and easily cut the wire with about five yards to spare, which he then wrapped around a support on their side of the cliff. Once the entire procedure had been repeated, there were two thin wires bridging the cliffs.

"Get in the carriage," D told them, not showing a sign of exertion.

"Wait just a second there! You planning on crossing on those wires?"

Meeker looked pale, even in the darkness of night. Iriya had a distinct look of fear on her face.

"Let's go!" D said, mounting one of the cyborg horses and heading for the carriage.

A few minutes later, the carriage began to race across the new bridge. It looked for all the world like it was flying above the abyss.

Is My Blood That of Friend or Foe?

chapter 7

I

The carriage raced on until daybreak with Iriya and Meeker sleeping within. When the girl awoke, she realized the carriage had halted in the woods. It was nearly noon.

Leaving the still-slumbering Meeker as he was, Iriya decided to step outside. The door wouldn't open. A Noble's lock was on it. There was no sign of D anywhere; when he'd gone outside, he must've locked the door. That would prevent anyone from getting inside while he was gone. She was about to give up and return to Meeker's side when she heard the sound of the lock disengaging, and the door opened.

Outside was D—and a short way off stood a boy who wore protective armor made of high-polymer rubber over his clothes. To his rear were five or six lesser fire dragons. He was a dragon master, which indicated they were close to the northern Frontier.

D said there was a village called Jassum nearby. The boy was from there. On seeing Iriya, he informed her that today was a festival day. Apparently it was the date when the guardian deity—also named Jassum—had descended to Earth and told the founders to build a village there. Now that the boy mentioned it, she noticed the sound of what might have been firecrackers in the distance.

Looking back at the carriage, Iriya said, "Meeker will be overjoyed! Let's take at least one day off. Give a thought to your traveling companions for once."

"Please do," the youthful dragon master said, grinning with pleasure. His blue eyes reflected Iriya. "My family runs an inn."

Behind the boy, the fire dragons blew fifteen feet of flames in unison. The reason for that display was unclear.

Jassum was a miniature garden of a village that looked as though it might be swallowed up at any moment by the clear blue sky. Its population couldn't have exceeded a hundred. Strings of firecrackers draping down narrow streets and across the roofs of houses exploded into flame, one after another; people wearing masks and costumes representing dragons, one-eyed beasts, armored serpents, and gods of all shapes paraded down the street; and old men who'd drunk their fill of

the wine spilling from a portable shrine slumped all around. Meeker's eyes were alight, and his upper body swayed to the tune of what were most likely folk songs drifting from unseen speakers.

On the west end of the square stood the establishment run by the boy—Al—and his family: the Bumper Crop Inn.

"Keeping dragons and running an inn—your parents have their fingers into everything, don't they?" Iriya remarked, half in jest.

"We even do modifications on cyborg horses," Al replied, beckoning to the trio to follow him in.

Rooms to rent were on the second floor, with the first floor occupied by a dining room, a small parlor, and the management's living quarters. The dining room also served as a bar, where more than a few people were buying drinks to enjoy in the lobby. The half dozen guests they had took one look at D and Iriya and froze in their tracks. Ignoring the whiskey that spilled from tilted glasses to splatter on their knees, they stared stupidly at the pair. All of them were male. But beauty knew no gender.

Once in their room, Iriya ordered a soda water without even bothering to set down her load, while Meeker immediately began pleading, "I wanna go outside!"

"Sure thing, so long as D goes with you," the Huntress said.

"No way. I couldn't relax at all," he retorted somewhat impertinently.

"Then no. There's no telling who's gunning for us."

After that, she wouldn't hear any more the boy had to say, and he started crying before crumpling on his bed at last.

Success! she thought, but just then Al came in and invited her to go to the festival with him. Inside, Iriya was cursing and grinding her teeth, but she resigned herself to it and said, "Sure. Is it okay if the boy comes with us, too?"

Disappointment showed on Al's face, but he didn't say no.

Iriya decided not to ask for D's permission. Clearly it wouldn't be forthcoming. She thought it'd be fine as long as they came back fairly soon. However, she had no firm idea of what would constitute "fairly soon."

"They're heading out," the hoarse voice said.

D headed for the door. He could hear the voices in the next room as if the wall wasn't even there. His right hand took hold of the doorknob, and at the same time his whole body turned to the right.

Swaying in the floor at D's feet with a cold twang was a silver arrow. Did it come from someone else sent by their foes?

The sword that never left his side was drawn, glittering as it waited for its next victim.

"Outside the window," his left hand informed him, but D ignored that and turned back toward the door.

Five seconds passed. Ten.

There was a knock at the door. Just as it burst open, D thrust the tip of his blade against the chest of his visitor.

"Inhospitable as ever. And after all the love I have for you."

Showing him a quick grin before glancing down at the sword against her throat was a fairly young woman sheathed in black protective gear, with quivers on her back and knee and a lowered bow in her right hand.

"Remember me? It's Gianne!"

"You the one who saved the boy?"

His question, which avoided her own and showed not the least interest in her actions or situation, led the archeress to look somewhat disappointed as she answered in the affirmative.

"And I provided the girl with backup when she was battling Albidozen, too. But during the fight the driver shot me in the shoulder, taking me out of the action. Judging from the way you folks are strolling around the village in broad daylight without a care in the world, I take it Albidozen's been put down."

"Who are you working for now?"

"That's top secret. Are you ready to lop both my arms off to get it out of me?"

As she jokingly gazed at D, the color suddenly drained from her countenance.

"That was a joke! I'm just kidding."

She barely managed something resembling a smile, but a drop of sweat fell from her suddenly pale face. The question remained unanswered.

"It's Count Langlan."

"If you'd like to tell me about it," the Hunter said, "stay where you are."

Apparently these two were meeting for the first time in a long time, yet D almost seemed to push the rooted girl aside as he stepped out into the hall.

"Don't!" Gianne shouted. "Outside it's Kraken's territorial waters!"

Of course, the Grim Reaper himself could've been out there, and it still wouldn't have halted the figure in black.

A sweets vendor had been set up right next to the inn, and Iriya bought three bunches of cotton candy on sticks and handed two to the boys. Meeker was absolutely delighted, taking the fluffy candy in hand and mashing it into a small wad that he bit into as if it were a dinner roll.

“That’s an odd way of eating it you have,” the Huntress said.

“No, that’s the way a man eats it!” Al replied, and he did the same.

With Al at the fore, the trio walked toward the town square. Usually, an image of the village’s patron deity, the focus of the festival, would be set up in the square to receive offerings of prayer day and night. A number of roads led to the square. They were lined with handmade stands run by villagers, as well as rows of stalls set up by the wandering mountebanks such festivals drew like a magnet. Beneath the rough canvas awnings, arrays of garishly colorful treats and toys that would make any child’s eyes sparkle awaited their pint-sized patrons.

Iriya noticed that as they got closer to the square, Al couldn’t stop looking all around them.

“What’s the matter?”

“It’s just that I don’t see any of the lookouts.”

Festivals drew trouble. Quarrels between villagers were bad enough, but when outsiders with questionable intentions were added to the mix, you ended up with more burglars entering empty homes or women and children being abducted than anyone could ever count. To guard against such occurrences, lookouts were posted—armed volunteers from the village who would split into a few groups and either keep watch in an assigned place or go out on patrol. Though each street should’ve had at least two men on it, Al hadn’t seen any.

They were just at the end of the street and the entrance to the square. Walk another twenty yards, and they’d see the little golden shrine surrounded by throngs of villagers. The sky was clear, and the cheery annual bustle continued to the accompaniment of firecrackers, sunshine, and voices raised in song.

“We’re going back, Meeker!”

The boy was amazed to hear that, seemingly out of the blue. Still, he didn’t make any objection because of the strain and deadly intent Iriya’s voice carried.

Al asked her quite innocently what was wrong.

“Are there any lookouts?”

Looking around, Al let a curious “hmm” escape.

As he did, Iriya took Meeker’s hand and began jogging back the way they’d come.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Meeker asked, going with her but not knowing why.

“I don’t know. We shouldn’t have gone outside!”

As Iriya spoke, a small spot on her back grew hot. Her blade shot out on reflex, and the dart it bisected fell to the ground.

Shocked, the people around her either froze in their tracks or gave Iriya odd looks as they passed her. Most likely all they’d seen was that the girl who’d been walking along normally one second had suddenly changed and was standing there now with sword in hand. Iriya’s speed

was so great, it'd looked like a jump cut in a film.

There was a round of applause. Iriya turned and looked behind her.

On the opposite side of the street a dart booth had been set up. Since the street was narrow, the ten-foot-deep booth extended down a little alley perpendicular to the street. The booth was just about wide enough to allow two adults or three children to line up and throw at the same time. At a range of ten feet, even adults would have a hard time hitting the center of the circular targets. A man of average height and build in a hunting cap stood in front of the booth, which surprisingly enough was devoid of patrons. There was a red towel draped around his neck. Iriya's eyes caught the gleam of darts between the fingers of his right hand.

"What the hell was that all about?"

The fortyish man grinned and replied, "Well, you just looked like you were out for blood, so I couldn't help but take a poke at you. And just as I suspected, you're damned good. Just about shriveled my balls!"

"Thanks. So, what do I owe you for the dart I—"

"Don't sweat it. See you around."

Before the man had even finished speaking, Iriya started to walk away again. And her blood froze. She was no longer holding Meeker's hand. She'd let go of it the instant she cut down the dart.

Before she could call out the boy's name, she heard a familiar voice say, "Iriya."

Al was standing in an alley directly across from the dart booth, beckoning to her.

"The kid went that way," he said, pointing down the alley.

Thank heaven for small favors, Iriya thought as she charged forward. When she looked over her shoulder, she saw Al following.

To her left was the side of someone's house, while to her right were some woods.

"You can't come with me!" she told the young man.

"Why not? Up ahead's the swamp. You're safer having me along!"

"No," she told him, but he came along anyway. Iriya hadn't yet noticed the flames of affection that burned in the boy's eyes.

Suddenly she thought, *If only D were here.*

II

The Hunter left his room—or he thought he did, but he found himself back inside it. The window was now in front of him. It seemed as if he'd just charged in through the door.

D turned around. Gianne was in the doorway.

"It's a fold in space," the hoarse voice said, sounding intrigued.

"My, you're still tied to him, Left Hand? How tenacious of you! Mind if I come in? Oh, just for your information: cutting me down won't get you out of the fold. So, let's have a little talk."

D raised his left hand.

Gianne let the tension drain from her body. She was relieved that D hadn't drawn his longsword.

"Could it be you're playing nice because I saved those other two?"

"You've got three minutes before you have to leave."

After D spoke, his right hand flashed into action. All Gianne saw was a momentary gleam. She hadn't been able to move a muscle. She couldn't even begin to guess what had occurred.

Finally she cried out in shock, "You were out for my blood?" and backed away.

Though she knew full well what D was capable of, she still couldn't believe her own carotid artery had been cut. She touched it to see. The wound had already closed. Not only that, but it didn't even hurt.

Acting as if nothing had transpired, D put the blade of his sword against the palm of his left hand. The steel was wet and red—with blood from Gianne's artery. He immediately brought the blade away again. All the blood had been wiped from it.

"Tell me about the connection between Langlan and Kraken," D said before going over to a small table beside the bed. On it sat a ceramic pitcher full of water and a cup. He put the lip of the pitcher against his hand. With the slightest of slurps, the pitcher was sucked into the palm of the Hunter's left hand. There was the sound of chewing.

The pitcher was fired clay. That made water and earth.

Gianne began to speak by asking, "Do you believe Nobles can be conscious of their crimes?"

There was no reply. That was D.

Gianne went on. "Langlan was one of the few in the Nobility who possessed a conscience. That girl—Iriya, was it?—well, he has long regretted the fact that they attacked her home, slew her parents, and abducted her siblings."

Between the sounds of crunching and chewing, the hoarse voice grumbled something about it being a little too late for that.

"When they learned that the girl they'd bitten and left behind had become a Hunter and was out to get them, he alone was delighted. At that point his compatriots had a half-serious meeting about how to stave off her attack, and he was the only one who failed to attend. Not only that, but he hired me—and others—to secretly keep her and her friends safe!"

"There were others?"

"Five, all told. Did you think the girl had slain all those Nobles on her own? Most were actually slain by her guardians." For just a moment, a faraway look came to her eye. "I'm not sure whether or not you'll believe me, but Langlan is prepared to let the girl destroy him. That's why he defied his father-in-law and had us protect the girl."

"Father-in-law?"

"Didn't you know? Langlan's wife was Kraken's only daughter. Of

course, two hundred and fifty or sixty years ago she was destroyed, not by you but by some other Hunter. Ever since, Langlan has been a confirmed bachelor."

"That's one messed-up Noble," the hoarse voice remarked.

"Now, I only happened to glimpse it by chance, but he has a photo of a human girl on display in his private quarters. A beautiful lass of seventeen, maybe eighteen. There was no name written on it."

"Is Kraken aware of his son-in-law's meddling?"

"Vaguely. If he had any real evidence, I suppose he'd have done away with Langlan by now."

"If Langlan wants Iriya to attack him, why is he trying to stop me?"

"Because you're in the way!" Gianne stated brazenly.

Less than ten minutes later, Iriya and Al were at the edge of an ancient swamp where the air was heavy with a miasma that distorted the sunlight and stands of trees. The place was the very embodiment of decay. The only saving grace was that they could still hear music playing at the festival.

Just beneath the surface of the black water, algae moved.

"Fall in here and there's no saving you," Al said, surveying their surroundings with distaste in his eyes.

"Did the kid walk off alone?"

"Nope. He had a tall, thin guy with him. It wasn't anyone from the village."

"Who was he? . . . Meeker!"

The Huntress had cupped one hand beside her mouth and shouted the boy's name, but Al grabbed her elbow roughly and tugged on it.

"What?"

"There," he said, pointing into the swamp.

Sure enough, the boy stood in the center of it. The water only came up to his ankles. It was almost as if someone were underwater holding him up, or—

Iriya turned to Al and said, "Go home. Or if you don't wanna do that, at least find someplace safe. And no matter what happens, don't leave that spot!"

Not waiting for him to reply, she called out into the swamp, "Meeker, come back this way."

Her reply came from down at Meeker's feet.

Iriya's eyes widened. She'd just noticed that on the water's surface, Meeker's reflection stood side by side with that of someone else—a tall, thin man.

"That's him!" Al yelled from a spot fifteen or twenty feet away. His eyes too were trained on the man reflected in the water's surface.

Indeed, the man was standing to Meeker's right. It was reflected in

the water. Yet there was no one next to the real Meeker.

The man smirked. “If you want this kid back, come into the water in his place.”

The voice came from the water’s surface.

“Don’t do it,” Al said in a firm tone.

Iriya made her decision quickly. Her foe could manipulate water. She knew as long as she remained on land, he couldn’t hope to win.

“Okay,” she told the man in the water. “But in return, you have to let the kid go right away.”

“Fine with me.”

“I think it’s only fair to tell you, I can’t swim!”

“Not to worry. All you have to do is look at me and keep walking.”

“Let the kid go first. Otherwise, I’m not going anywhere.”

The man nodded, giving a push to the back of the Meeker reflected in the water. Apparently the boy must’ve been through a terrifying experience, because he didn’t say a word. Showing no happiness at escaping his abductor, the boy silently walked across the water’s surface.

With a plop the Huntress’s foot sank up to the ankle, but there it stopped. Her footing was unsteady, but she’d get through this somehow. Planting one foot after another, she managed to maintain her balance as she proceeded in the direction dictated by the man reflected on the water’s surface. Her progress was intentionally slow, so that Meeker would have time to get back on dry land. If she reached the man first, he might take Meeker prisoner again, and this would all be for naught.

Every time one of them took a step, ripples spread across the water’s surface, distorting the man’s face.

The two passed each other when Iriya had gone a third of the way.

“Go straight back to D,” she told him in a low voice, and the boy’s face—a mask that didn’t even register fear—bobbed up and down.

When the Huntress had gone two-thirds of the way, she heard Al call out, “He made it!”

She was glad he’d insisted on coming along and wanted to shake his hand. Now she needn’t hold back any longer. She’d find her foe’s weakness and run him through. There was no hesitation in Iriya’s heart.

Once her feet had almost reached the man’s face, he ordered her to stop.

“Are you relieved that the boy is standing on dry land?” said the man reflected in the water’s surface. It looked for all the world like he was just a reflection there. Not underwater. “Well then, stand right beside me. Once you do, you’ll soon be just like me. Traveling through the water, we’ll reach Viscount Kraken’s castle in no time.”

That’ll happen . . . Iriya murmured in her heart of hearts . . . “In your dreams!”

Drawing her longsword with that cry, she drove it through the man’s

heart. It was exactly like stabbing into water—and the instant Iriya realized that, her body was enveloped by a great splash.

Holding her breath, she madly tried to rise to the surface—but couldn't. The man was above her. Was he on the water's surface, or in the water? At any rate, he was holding Iriya's head down with both hands.

On closer inspection, there was no dimensionality to the man at all. Just as before, he was an image reflected on the water's surface. Nevertheless, Iriya found it impossible to break through him and reach the surface. Though she thrust her longsword at him, the result was the same. When she tried to move away, the man's image mirrored her movements. He stuck with her.

"You won't die. I'll transform you once you've passed out."

The man's voice echoed through Iriya's head, which felt like it would explode, just as she was running out of breath. The last air left her lungs. Black water rushed into them. She would've choked violently, but that would've required her to be able to breathe. Her vision grew dark.

Suddenly her head broke the surface. Even before she was aware of the heat, she was coughing half to death as she bobbed and sank over and over again.

"Come this way!"

It was Al. He stood at the water's edge, beckoning to the Huntress. She spied a pair of fire dragons by his right side.

How did the boy summon them?, she had to wonder. Judging from the heat, she knew the dragons had released their flames.

There was still water in her lungs. Giving up on her question, Iriya began feverishly clawing her way through the water. Something caught hold of her foot.

She turned around. The man was on the water's surface. It wasn't his weird appearance that held Iriya's attention, but rather the burn marks that clearly remained on the right half of his face and body.

The fire dragons' flames could wound the water monster.

"I'm not letting you get away. Come here!" the man said in a voice like a wraith's. He pulled her closer.

Wringing out her last bit of strength, Iriya spun herself a hundred and eighty degrees.

"Dive!"

The man probably didn't realize what that cry from shore forewarned until the instant the scalding flames once again shot across the water, vaporizing the lower half of his body.

Having dived under to escape the boiling water, Iriya resurfaced to find the man had vanished without a trace.

Once she'd swum to shore, Iriya, still coughing, confirmed that Meeker was safe. Something must've been done to him, because his eyes were vacant and showed no emotion at the sight of her.

"Got to get him back to D. I need a breather!" the Huntress said, seemingly addressing herself, before she turned to Al.

"Thank you."

She wrapped her arms around him.

The boy became a stone statue.

"How did you call the fire dragons?"

"Er, um . . . with a flute."

He seemed to be in a daze after watching his home burn to the ground.

"But they got here so fast. It's almost as if they lived around here."

"Well, my house is on the other side of the swamp. It just happened to be watering time for them, and—"

"And they get their water from the swamp."

Once again, Iriya hugged the young man with all her might. Even after she let go of him, Al remained in exactly the same pose.

"Let's get going."

Taking the two boys by the hand, Iriya was leading them toward the village square when she heard something knifing through the air.

III

Arriving in the square, D and Gianne collided with the throng.

Desperate cries intermingled there.

"Carry him to Dr. Torres!"

"No, he's past saving now."

Pushing his way through the mob, D saw Al lying at its center. Darts impaled his heart and throat. It was clear at a glance that he'd received fatal injuries.

"What happened?" D asked a nearby farmer.

"Damned if I know. Just now, he fell to the ground as soon as he stepped from that alley."

"What's back that way?"

"The swamp. Nothing but that."

To D's rear, Gianne gasped. She said, "The waters are Kraken's domain! But—" She drew a breath. "This dart belongs to Don J. Aside from me, he's the only one left of those Langlan hired. If he's here—"

The archeress stiffened. And it wasn't just her—the surrounding villagers froze as well. The young man in black stood at the focus of a dead gaze.

"It's just a coincidence. All of us . . . We were working independently . . . You have to believe me!"

The mysterious tableau Gianne had witnessed a short time earlier flashed into her brain like lightning. As the left hand that'd consumed the entire ceramic pitcher told D that water and earth should be enough, the Hunter's sword had flashed out, and Langlan's fold in space—something a nuclear weapon wouldn't be able to scratch—had been

broken.

What was this gorgeous young man? For the first time Gianne had felt true fear.

However, now the superhuman killing lust had vanished, and he pressed his left hand to the boy's bloodied throat. The boy had already breathed his last. But then, with the murderous implements still stuck in him, Al squeezed out a faint thread of a voice.

The villagers pulled back like a sudden fleeing tide.

"The dart guy . . . from the festival . . . suddenly showed up . . . Said something about . . . taking Iriya and the kid . . . to Langlan's castle . . ."

D stood up. As soon as the Hunter's left hand came away, Al went to his reward.

On seeing how the young man of unearthly beauty put gleaming coins in the boy's mouth in keeping with Frontier tradition, the villagers were stunned. Those five-thousand-dala coins were worth about the same as the village's annual budget.

"Give him the best funeral the village can offer. What's left goes to his family."

No one needed to be warned against trying to pocket the money.

D turned to Gianne.

"Going to kill me, too?"

The whole village froze.

"Please . . ."

That was all Gianne could manage by way of a reply. And it took her eleven seconds to muster that much.

"Show me the way to Langlan's castle."

Gianne could only nod her consent to D's demand.

The whole reason Gianne had called on D was to inform him of Count Langlan's intentions and to get him to stop Iriya's travels. Before Langlan let Iriya exact her revenge on him, he wanted to solve the riddle of why she remained physically human despite having been bitten. Toward that end, Iriya alone was to be led back to his castle. D was in the way. Gianne had orders to get rid of him. And now—they were riding their cyborg horses night and day in a five-day trip to Langlan's castle, and she was staring at D's profile.

From the very start, she'd known it was no use.

Two years earlier, as a newly trained archer, Gianne had been pursuing a group of five outlaws when she fell into their trap and was brought to the brink of death. Just as the pitch-black nothingness was about to swallow her up, D had come rushing in and laid waste to them. The keenness of his swordplay, along with his good looks, was enough to drive Gianne to rapture. She'd certainly been disappointed to learn that D had been pursuing the same outlaws.

When she'd first entered the Nobleman's employ, she hadn't known the Huntress had traveling companions. However, on learning that it

was D that accompanied her, Gianne had given up the fight. Only partly because she was in his debt. Ever since, she'd burned as a woman. No, as a human being. In Gianne's eyes, D was an object of adoration surpassing the ideal man—a being who would allow her to maintain her purity.

"What in the—?"

Far in the distance, a purplish light was rising from the desolate plain. At supersonic speed.

". . . One thousand . . . One thousand five hundred . . . Two thousand . . ."

The afternoon sky was clear. When the light burst, the heavens darkened. Rain clouds. But they weren't hanging over D and Gianne.

"Roughly thirty miles ahead of us," the hoarse voice said. "Someone shot off a rain shell—and Kraken favors the water."

The man—Don J—had taken great pains to avoid the water. It was the source of the opposition's power. It existed everywhere. Though he had faith in the implements his employer had provided, the enemy was simply too powerful.

Don J also saw the point of light.

Oh, shit! he thought, because it'd been fired from somewhere terribly close by, and the instant those dark clouds spread overhead, rain began to pound down like a waterfall. However, he had no choice but to keep going.

The man advanced his wagon and its two-horse team beneath the dark clouds. Iriya had been injected with a hypnotic drug, Meeker seemed to have had his soul sucked out to begin with, and both of them lay in the cargo bed behind him. He'd had the foresight to purchase the wagon from a farmer in advance.

The rain intensified, and the horses and wagon seemed to give off white smoke. Don J was already soaked to the skin. The rain was bad enough, but water from the wagon wheels splashed him from head to toe, forcing him to hold his breath.

"To the east it's all swamps and lakes—can't go that way, not even by accident!"

The fight hadn't gone out of Don J's eyes.

Suddenly, the horses changed direction. They turned left—onto the road east.

"Idiots! Where do you think you're going?"

Though he madly tugged on the reins and cracked the whip, the horses wouldn't halt their crazed gallop in the one direction they weren't supposed to go in. Almost as if they were receiving orders from some other, more capable driver.

"What gives? Whoa! Would you *stop* already?"

Shifting his gaze from the backs of the horses to their hooves, Don J widened his eyes.

The damp black earth held a reflection of the horses' legs and the driver's seat. He also made out a man cracking a whip. Too shocked for words, Don J fearfully turned his eyes to his right. There was no one there. And there was no way there could be. Yet—he looked down again. There was a man. Wasn't he covered in bandages and sitting to Don's right, working that whip?

Don J lashed with the whip like a man possessed. The bandaged man struck as well. Though it was Don J's whip that actually struck them, in his reflection in the water he had no whip in his hands, and the bandaged figure's whip alone controlled the horses.

Rain surrounded him. Driving rain. And wasn't the water Viscount Kraken's world?

It was unclear just how much time had passed, but the world was sealed in darkness, while only the pounding of iron-shod hooves defied the sound of the rain—but they stopped unexpectedly.

Taking a repeating rifle from the weapon locker under the driver's seat, Don J braced the weapon against his shoulder.

"Come on! I'm just waiting for you!"

His shouts were instantly obliterated by the rain. *But look!* Not thirty feet ahead of the wagon, an unmistakably human figure had taken shape. The instant Don J was sure it was a man wrapped from head to toe in bandages, he pulled the trigger on his rifle. The force of the large-bore rifle was evident in the way the nearly twelve-pound weapon kicked.

The bandaged figure's head was blown to bits. Just like the rain, they were clear water. From the neck down the figure had collapsed, clothes and all.

"Did that finish him?" Don J said to himself, thinking he had an eternal mystery on his hands.

"Nope."

The voice came from down at his feet.

Looking down reflexively, Don J saw on the water's surface the figure in bandages sitting in the driver's seat.

"Son of a bitch!"

Standing up and quickly firing a shot into the mysterious form, all he saw was a splash of water, and once that was gone the bandaged figure was in the driver's seat again.

"You son of a bitch, you!" Don J shouted, so whipped up all he could do was adjust his hold on the rifle.

That same rifle was wrenched from his grip by a hand that'd suddenly reached around from behind him.

"What are you—?"

Was what Don J saw real? Or was it some dream reflected in the

falling rain?

Grinning by Don J's right side, the bandaged figure pulled the trigger of the gun now leveled by his hip.

Taking the kind of massive sixty-caliber round that would pierce a fire dragon's armor to the center of his chest, Don J was blown fifteen feet from the driver's seat, sending up a great splash as he hit the black ground.

Lowering the rifle, the bandaged figure let out a low laugh. "The water is Viscount Kraken's domain! As soon as you were soaked in the rain, this fight was as good as over."

He turned to the bed of the wagon.

"We may need the woman, but the brat's of no further use. Here's where you buy it."

Not hesitating in the least, he turned the cruel barrel of the weapon on Meeker. The bandaged finger around the rifle's trigger gave a strong squeeze.

A heartbeat later, there was an explosive flash.

Account of a Bloody Noble Battle

chapter 8

I

A blast had occurred between the wagon and its reflection on the road not twenty yards ahead. The blinding flash of white light carried enough heat to instantly vaporize the falling rain. It evaporated the moisture alone, not even singeing anything else. Iriya and Meeker were both unharmed, and while the pile of bandages in the driver's seat was steaming, the cloth wasn't charred.

The strange heat dart had been hurled by Don J, who'd since given up the ghost. As proof of his confidence in his ability to exact vengeance on his foe even on the brink of death, his face wore a rictus that was practically hysterical with mirth.

When D and Gianne arrived on the scene, the wagon carrying Iriya and Meeker had halted, along with the horses pulling it. Though remnants of the wondrous battle between fire and water still remained, D paid no attention to them, climbing instead into the back of the wagon. He immediately put his left hand to Meeker's brow, and the hoarse voice informed him, "Nothing out of the ordinary."

At the same time, Meeker opened his eyes. His hand reached out for Iriya.

A drop of water splashed against the back of it.

"Kraken," Gianne said from the back of her steed, shaking free the bow she wore over her left shoulder. It wasn't the repeating-fire kind. Hers was an old-fashioned half-moon bow that fired one shot at a time. Nocking the first arrow, she waited with four more sandwiched between the fingers of her left hand. The half-moon bow might not have repeating fire, but it could be shot in a manner so artistic and unholy no crossbow could match it.

The silky threads of rain from the artificial storm swiftly became a torrential downpour. Covering Meeker and Iriya with a waterproof tarp from the wagon, D stood tall and looked all around.

Gianne's breath was taken away.

The rain-hazed stand of trees ahead unexpectedly blurred like a watercolor painting dropped in a puddle, the trees crashing down as if they were pillars of water. Next, a closer tree dissolved, then a second was transformed into water.

"D, at this rate it's going to get us too!"

D didn't respond to Gianne's cry. When he saw the fifth tree away from them melt into water, he threw a rough wooden needle into the

fourth. An unearthly cry of pain shattered the droning downpour. The stand of trees remained as it was, and the rainfall concentrated beside it.

Shrouded in what almost looked like white smoke, a colossal figure more than ten feet tall came into focus like an image in India ink.

"Viscount Kraken?"

It was unclear whether Gianne was cowed by his overwhelming size and his air of malevolence, but on the back of her rearing cyborg horse she kept her arrow unerringly trained on the giant's heart.

Closing his massive hand into a fist and pulling something from the left side of his chest, he hurled it straight at D with a grunt.

Easily catching the rough wooden needle that'd pierced the giant's heart in his left hand, the Hunter introduced himself, saying, "I'm D, and I have something to ask you." Either he didn't realize he was in no position to be making requests, or he was showing his confidence that his deadly skill could slay the giant where he stood.

"Ah," said the voice that fell from ten feet high, carrying evident surprise. "I believe I have heard that name before. You are an exquisite man, I see. Now I can understand why Nobles could be so taken with the sight of you that they're easily cut down."

Striking the left side of his chest, he said, "You made me experience pain for only the second time in my life. You're a man to be feared. However, if all that skill cannot slay me, then it matters not! See what it is to battle in Kraken's watery hell—and then die."

An arrow whined through the air, sinking into the Nobleman right between the eyes. Seemingly having no effect at all, the arrow came out through the back of his head.

"Did you imagine an arrow would have any effect on water? The man known as D is special!" Viscount Kraken declared in a voice like bubbles bursting. In fact, something foamy was actually spilling from his thick, toad-like lips. It didn't fall to the ground, but rather rose high into the darkness.

"You know, there's something I've been wondering about for a while now," Gianne said in a fashion that was actually rather bold. "Isn't water supposed to be taboo for the Nobility?"

"Correct," Kraken replied without the least delay. "Before I became like this, I was a Noble living on dry land. That was four and a half millennia ago. However, one spring day a faulty setting on the aircraft carrying my wife and daughter caused it to crash in the lakes region. *This* is the result."

Changing the subject, he continued, "What do you think are the ways to destroy a Noble? A wooden stake driven through the heart, decapitation, burning in fire? All will suffice, and all do a splendid job of reducing us to dust. All save drowning. My wife and daughter were ladies who placed more value on their Nobility than anyone I know. All their lives it was so. I know not how many times they scolded me for my

own lapses. However, when the two of them were fished from the lake, they were foul swine bloated with all the water they had inhaled. It was then that I swore I would master water. And it took me some three thousand seven hundred years to reach this point!"

"A Noble who wanted to be a fish—that wouldn't even make a good routine for some comedian out in the sticks," the hoarse voice spat venomously.

"I of all people can solve the riddle of this girl's physiology. Why is it that time and again she has felt the fangs of Nobles, yet instead of being made their servant she raises her hand against them? This may very well be a boon to the declining Nobility. D, I shall take the girl now!"

A great splash of water bounced off the waterproof tarp. Focused rain. *And look!* The tarp, shrouded in gray, misty spray, lost its shape and color, and then began to disappear as if it were dissolving in the water—along with the two figures beneath it.

"That ain't good!" the hoarse voice exclaimed from the Hunter's left hand. D had just placed it on the tarp.

See how that veritable waterfall of rain became a single column of water that was swallowed by the mouth that opened in the palm of the Hunter's hand.

In the darkness, the mountain of a Nobleman gasped.

Gianne's bowstring twanged twice, sending its projectiles toward his heart. She knew full well the attack was in vain. However, when they pierced the heart of that colossal figure, they became scorching balls of flame.

"Gaaaaaah!"

Kraken—the great sea beast—doubled over, clutching his chest. Beneath his hands, it glowed crimson. Just then, fireballs and black smoke gushed from his mouth, nose, and ears, followed shortly by more from his stomach and crotch.

"Count Langlan was good enough to give me these flame arrows. He thought if there was any weapon that could slay Viscount Kraken, this was it."

The giant jerked his head back and opened his mouth. Smoke still poured from his mouth like it was a chimney, and his whole body twitched.

D didn't wait for the smoke to stop. The instant he saw that the rain on the tarp had diminished with the viscount's spasms, the Hunter launched himself into the air. His legs were so powerful he easily sailed more than thirty feet, drawing his blade an instant later and swinging it at a neck as thick as a giant tree trunk.

The Nobleman's head fell. By the time it passed his chest it had become a ball of water devoid of eyes and a nose, and before it hit the ground it had fallen to droplets.

"What the—" Gianne exclaimed, pulling tight on the reins as the

Nobleman's body also turned to water and gushed toward her.

D was immersed in the weird water up to the waist, though it quickly receded again.

"That was easy, wasn't it?" Gianne said, but her expression was stiff. It was *too* easy. There was no way defeating him should've been so simple.

D went back to the wagon. He wanted to check that the pair under the tarp were okay.

Meeker gave him a weak thumbs-up.

"D," Gianne called out.

His left hand told him why. "We got company!"

From the way D looked up, it was clear he'd been aware of thatas well.

A stubby aircraft descended without a sound from the same sky that continued pelting them with rain, coming to rest on the ground a scant twenty yards away. In the sunlight, it would probably have appeared silver. D watched as part of the craft opened and three shadowy figures appeared.

The one in the fore glanced up. He stood well above the others as they walked toward the Hunter. Lightning flashed. A face appeared from the shadows.

"Count Langlan," Gianne murmured in a tone that carried fear.

II

Viscount Kraken had been turned to water, and now, amid howling wind and rain and flashes of light, Count Langlan, the last of the Nobles in question, had appeared. In the sun, his golden cape would've undoubtedly called to mind waves of light. Now its hue was subdued, and whipping in the wind, it was reminiscent of the spreading of dark, thick blood.

D climbed down from the wagon. Straight ahead of him, the group halted about ten feet away. This time it was D's face illuminated by the lightning.

"My word—the stories don't begin to do you justice," the tall Nobleman declared in a tone of obvious admiration. "I imagine you have already learned as much from the archeress, but I am Count Langlan."

"D."

Flashes of light illuminated the two figures by turns.

"I watched you battling that bastard Kraken from above. You did well to dispatch that monster."

"He'll be back soon."

D's reply drew a surprised reaction from the count. He groaned at the precision of the Hunter's assessment.

"Before he does, I should like you to accompany us to my castle. You

have my oath that you shall come to no harm. I think it most unwise to wait for Kraken in this rain. But I would ask that you not awaken the girl in the wagon. What I wish to know will be more easily discovered in her present condition."

"It's you that she's after."

"I realize as much. And once I learn what it is I wish to know, I shall be only too happy to let her attack me."

"And you won't go back on that, will you?"

"I saw her from above. How she has grown. And her years are a measure of my sin."

"Very well."

"You will be so good as to accompany us?" The count commanded the guards to either side of him, "Prepare our guest for the journey."

"No need for that," D said, turning his back to them. Until the Hunter entered the aircraft carrying Iriya and Meeker, the count remained there as still as a statue.

†

"It looks like we've arrived," the left hand informed the Hunter less than ten minutes after they took off.

Beyond the door that now opened, a vast castle loomed.

"If you would be so good as to proceed to my research center."

As the count led the group down a corridor, D said to him, "It'll be daybreak soon."

The time when Nobles must sleep was coming. Even when shielded from sunlight, Nobles as a rule fell into a kind of coma from daybreak to sunset. It was this major failing that made the humans' resistance to their rule possible.

"Even during the daytime I am able to move about freely. I do require the aid of the darkness, however."

"So, you've modified yourself, eh? And here I thought the Nobility were so full of themselves they didn't make any progress."

Perhaps the count was perfectly aware of the nature of the hoarse voice, because he didn't show any confusion as he replied, "Actually, that is precisely the case. My research is not born of doubt and denial of the Noble condition. It is the result of purely academic pursuit."

The group walked down a long corridor, boarded a linear elevator, and then walked some more before entering a room where old-fashioned lab equipment sat side by side with the very latest technology.

"I would have them wait in a back room until preparations are complete—through that door."

Once D had set Iriya and Meeker down on sofas in a room resembling a salon, Gianne—who'd followed him—said, "Lovely girl, isn't she?"

As she gazed at the sleeping Iriya, the archeress wore the expression of an ordinary woman. Hunters couldn't really be human. But there

were times when this ironclad rule was broken. There, beside the one who'd made her lower her guard, Gianne set down her bow and quivers and leaned back against the wall facing the doorway.

"D," she called over to the Hunter, "I don't think the girl's cut out for this."

"How can you tell?"

"There's no better way to read a person's true character than to look at their face while they're asleep. She's too peaceful."

She got no reply. Without another word, Gianne hit the wall with her hand.

D was standing on a sunlit plain. The winds that riffled the grass made his hair flutter.

"Off in the distance are silvery mountain peaks and a lake like a bright blue jewel," the hoarse voice commented. "Such childish imaginings."

"How romantic. How sentimental. How humanistic. Is this the true nature of the Nobility? Do they really just wanna be human?"

That harsh tone caused D to return his gaze to the archeress.

The Nobility's virtual reality technology could create original scenes or duplicate sights they'd actually seen. Which was this?

The scenery changed.

It was evening in a valley. The river's flow reflected the color of the dusky sky, and by its banks lights glowed in a lone log cabin. The smoke from a cooking supper rose from its chimney.

Watching in silence, Gianne suddenly pulled away from the wall and turned toward the house. Without hesitating, she stepped into the river, waded across undiscouraged by its rapid flow, and approached the log cabin.

D heard a number of people laughing.

Gianne halted at the front door; then, after a moment or two, she went over to a window and peered in. Light spilled out. Her expression was peaceful.

Someone began singing to the accompaniment of a strummed tune. A young woman.

"Nice pipes," the hoarse voice said. "She's even got the darkness bewitched. I wouldn't mind spending the rest of my life in this godforsaken valley if it meant I could listen to that."

In D's field of view Gianne had remained motionless for quite some time, but she quietly backed away from the window and returned to him.

"Make you homesick?" the voice from his left hand teased.

"Such a big family," Gianne replied, going back to her original position by the wall. In a little while, dry lips that never saw lipstick slowly began to hum a melody.

"That's the same song," the hoarse voice said.

Just then, the scene changed three times. No sooner had the room returned to its original state than the count's voice announced, "I shall begin now. If you would be so good as to step inside."

D walked over to Iriya without a pause.

Putting the still-sleeping girl into an examination pod, the count tapped lightly on the container's light-green surface.

"Three millennia of accumulated trial and error—this should be nearly perfect, though I cannot say that with complete confidence."

He was unable to conceal his pride or his apprehension, but then, as if he'd just remembered something, the count glanced at Gianne standing by the door and said, "It would seem a mass murder was perpetrated in a village the girl passed through. More than forty people were killed. Did you not notice?"

"When was this?" asked D. With that he turned his gaze to Gianne, then returned it to the pod, saying, "Get started."

The count's right hand pressed something, and while the silence remained unchanged, it began to alternate between darkness and light. The longswords and spears decorating the walls sank into darkness, then appeared again. Visible through the pod's window, Iriya's face was bathed in the same steady blue light.

On the wall in front of D and Gianne, innumerable glowing characters began to flash. The characters were unlike those of any human language in style or structure.

"Those are what they call 'Noble characters,' " the left hand explained.

A different light tinged the room red.

"Unusual developments beneath branch three," a fluid mechanical voice informed them. "Everything is turning into water. I repeat: everything is turning into water."

"Come, have you, Kraken?" Count Langlan grumbled, his whole body trembling.

Turning to the ceiling, he commanded, "There is no need to counterattack. Ignore him."

Then he put his hand inside his cape and pulled out what appeared to be a gold bar. Beckoning to Gianne, he took her hands and closed them around the bar.

"Here is your compensation. I hope it will be sufficient for you to reclaim your memory."

Gianne looked over at the pod, then at the door that led to the corridor.

"Five thousand Noble dalas—that's three times what we agreed on! I'll have to throw in a little extra effort."

"You are to do no such thing. Take the child and flee this place," the

count said, eyes on the door to the back of the room.

The child in question was Meeker.

Staring at him coldly, Gianne said, “There’s nothing a huntsman hates more than having his game snatched away from him. If that lousy sea monster makes off with the girl, it’ll leave me in a bad mood for the rest of my days.”

Her lithe form zipped away.

“So long, D,” she called back casually, as if she were just going to hop in the bath.

“Gianne.”

The count’s words met only the back of the solitary figure.

D said nothing.

The door opened, swallowing the girl with the quiver on her back when it closed again. Not once had she turned around.

The count went back to the characters on the wall.

“That’s the opening of *The Noble Declaration*,” the hoarse voice declared after a cursory reading of the characters, and the count confirmed it.

“That is correct. But why would this be encoded into the DNA of a lowly human . . . ?”

“It’s a safeguard,” said the hoarse voice.

The count nodded weakly. “Their number is infinite. Let us approach from a different angle.”

The speed of the shifts between darkness and light increased.

The Noble characters warped, their positions shifting, taking on weird new structures and arrangements.

“But these are . . . ?”

The count became a stone statue. Only his lips moved.

“These symbols—I saw a recording of them in the Capital, at the House of Peers Library. They—”

“They’re Sacred Ancestor characters.”

Stunned, the count turned to face the speaker.

Said to be used solely by the Sacred Ancestor and his family, these characters had become the stuff of legend even among the Nobility, yet now they filled his wall.

“Initiate translation,” the count commanded as he kept his eyes riveted on D.

He immediately received an answer: “Translation impossible. Translation impossible. Persons capable of deciphering said characters: only one at present.”

“D!” the count called out. “Can you read this? You can read it, can’t you? I will not ask you how—but please tell me. What is the secret to being bitten by a Noble but not becoming a Noble? Also, is there any more to it—special abilities, or side effects?”

The room rocked uneasily. The walls, ceiling, floor, and everything

else were losing their firmness, becoming pliable.

"Come, have you, Kraken?"

The count raised his right hand. Lightning shot from it, halting the transformation into water. No, only slowing it slightly.

Purple waves of electromagnetism coursed around the pod, the lid of which opened wide.

"No!"

The count was just about to move away when a figure slowly rose before him—Iriya. It was unclear whether this had been the invader's intent, or whether it was purely coincidental.

Ripples ran across the surface of the door leading out to the corridor, and then what should appear but a dim shape that took human form and passed through the door. Though he was dressed in the ornate raiment of a Noble, he had a face and build so youthful it would've been difficult to even call him a young man.

"Chulos."

Both the count and D heard Iriya's voice. The Huntress was out of the pod.

"So nice of you to come, Sis."

The last member of the family that'd once lived peacefully in a valley—her younger brother Chulos—sadly greeted his sister.

III

"But you're too late."

Tears glistened in the boy's eyes. Glittering, they slid down his cheeks, stopping at the jaw before falling to the floor.

"I wanted to go home. Back to our little cabin in the valley. I wanted to go home to Mom and Dad, to Yan and Pol and Maggie. To work in the garden with everyone, hunt beasts, sit down to dinner together . . . I wanted to hear Gia's songs, too . . . But now it's too late!"

Deep in Chulos's eyes, a dull red glow began to shine.

"At the very least . . . You could join me, Sis . . . Become like me . . . It's not really true that you went around killing all the others, is it? Don't kill me, at least . . ."

"Chulos . . ."

Tears rolled from Iriya's eyes, too.

The letters on the wall changed. The workings of the girl's mind were having an effect on the mysteries encoded in her DNA.

"Forgive me, Chulos . . . I have to . . . You need to . . ."

"Please don't kill me, Sis . . . If you do . . . I'll . . ."

The boy grinned evilly.

"Chulos . . ."

The Sacred Ancestor characters looked as if they were about to change again.

"I'll do this!"

Chulos snapped his mouth open wide.

Iriya's eyes were drawn to the Noble's fangs, a sight to make even the most indomitable human look away.

"Forgive me," Iriya said, all emotion vanishing from her face.

The boy sailed into the air. Like a shooting star freed from gravity's bonds, he zipped straight toward Iriya's face.

Iriya's right hand came up. There was no sword in it for a counterattack.

Sister and brother became one, melting together. Not as family—but as human and Noble. A flash of silver fluttered through the air.

The world stopped. So that the boy, who'd circled around behind Iriya, could show his intentions of burying his fangs in his sister's pale throat.

When movement returned, the boy thudded to the floor. His little head left his body, and bright blood shot out.

"Chulos."

Iriya stooped down and picked up her brother's head. The eyes opened. Sad and weak, they were the eyes of a human.

"I'm sorry, Sis," he said, moving lips covered in blood. "But . . . your throat . . . My teeth marks . . . aren't on it. I'm glad . . . Sis . . . You didn't . . . end up like me."

Darkness and light tinged his face, and in one of those stark flashes the boy breathed his last. Iriya didn't hold the head close but rather set it down on the floor by her feet, then folded her hands together and recited what seemed to be a sadly perfunctory prayer.

The letters on the wall had stopped. They'd ended when she'd decapitated her younger brother.

"You must tell me, D," the count insisted. "You should understand . . . You of all people."

D was gazing at Iriya.

The hoarse voice murmured, "Are there gonna be side effects?"

Heaven and earth shook violently—and before they knew it, everything was sinking into the floor. No, into the water! Laughter echoed from beneath the gray floor, and as D, the count, and Iriya watched, the floor rose up like a mountain. From a spray of water that rivaled a waterfall—no, not water, but a spray of the *floor*—the enormous form of the mighty Viscount Kraken came into view.

"Is that what it takes to master water, Kraken?" Count Langlan bellowed, and his disappointment was understandable.

The skin on the giant's face and hands was as swollen and purple as a drowning victim's, while his enormous form wobbled like a sack full of water. A thin covering of mold grew on his skin, and those dead fish eyes of his contained not a single spark of vitality.

So, this was a Noble who lived in the water? This was another shape for the Nobles who danced their splendid waltzes in the moonlight, lent

their ears to minstrels' tales, and whistled tunes up and down highways of indestructible metal that ran all the way to the moon?

"Even the sight of you is revolting. Die, Kraken!"

From all over the ceiling red beams of light converged on the titanic figure. These were no ordinary lasers or heat rays. They were bizarre beams of scalding heat that evaporated water alone.

Swirling with steam, the water boiled. Viscount Kraken's colossal form was rapidly changing shape.

"Be the water you so love, become steam, and spread across the entire planet. Life comes from water. Kraken, it is you who—"

In the midst of his roaring laughter, Count Langlan was pierced through the back and chest with a transparent stake. A stake made of water. One twist of it sent the count's body flying against the wall behind, and as that wall had been transformed into water, Langlan sank halfway into it.

A different opponent charged the giant head on. When the Hunter's blade pierced the Nobleman's heart, the gigantic figure became a wave of water that swallowed D.

Pain enveloped the Hunter. As descendants of the Nobility, dhampirs feared running water. It wreaked havoc with their metabolism and left them unable to breathe.

D rose through the water. But there was no surface to it.

"You are within me," Kraken said, his voice ringing sharply through the Hunter's head. "You cannot escape. I will not let you go! Experience the same agony my wife and daughter did before they perished. You shall be joining them. And know you this: my mastery of water springs from the teachings of the Sacred Ancestor! No one but those of his line could ever defeat it. D, prepare to meet your maker!"

At that point, crimson wisps enveloped D's face. Before Kraken realized the Hunter had bitten through his own lip, D swung his blade.

Such a cold, cruel face he wore! Fangs peeking from between the lips that'd given him that taste of lifeblood. D, are you too a descendant of the Nobility?

Perhaps it took the sword of a damned man to slay the damned, because D's blade sliced through the water, and he leapt out into the air through the cut. Though a number of watery spears jabbed after him, a flash of silver mowed through them all, reducing them to splashes of water that fell back onto Viscount Kraken's split belly.

"Impossible," the enormous figure drifting on the floor said in a dazed tone. "The only thing that could destroy me . . . is the Sacred Ancestor's . . . Could it be . . ."

His voice gave out at the same time his body dissolved.

A wave bore down on D, but he skillfully landed on it and rode it out. His feet hit the floor. It was firm. With Kraken's death, the water's spell had also been broken.

Iriya lay in front of the door. D was just about to go to her when a dying voice called out his name.

Imbedded in a wall that had regained its solidity, Count Langlan called to mind a bizarre sculpture. His right hand pointed straight ahead.

The letters on the wall were still emblazoned on its surface.

"Please tell me . . . D . . . What does that mean . . ."

D went over to the count, whose face was already a rictus, and placed his left hand on the Nobleman's brow. Several seconds passed—and then the count's eyes opened wide with astonishment.

"I can read it, D . . . But this . . . Is this the truth? Only . . . that would mean . . . failure . . . Side effects were too great . . . D . . . You alone . . . were a success . . ."

And then the count's neck snapped.

Stepping away from the body that was quickly turning to dust, D turned around.

"It was a failure," he murmured, but who would hear his words?

Nobody save one. Iriya.

How long had it been since she'd risen to her feet? How long since she'd pulled a sword down off the wall? How long had she been staring at D that way? How long—had her eyes been tinged the color of blood—or had fangs poked from between her lips? And who was Alucard?

With a beastly howl, Iriya charged at D. And D kicked off the floor, too. When the two figures passed each other, Iriya fell with blood on her chest, and D turned around. As he looked at Iriya, his expression was cold. That's what it meant to be a Hunter.

Lying on her back, Iriya watched through eyes fogged by white smoke as the young man sheathed his blade and walked toward her.

"D . . . What did I do?"

He didn't answer.

"It seems . . . I did terrible things . . . lots of them . . . in everytown . . ."

In the town of Clements. On the night before she'd donned the wedding dress.

Who was Alucard?

"You know . . . I . . . I'm lonely . . . I don't feel anything . . . Killed my brothers . . . my sister . . . and wasn't the least bit sad then . . . Is that . . . possible? When I was myself . . . when I was afraid . . . even having someone with me . . . it didn't make me happy . . . And to think . . . I'm going to go out not feeling anything . . . Hey . . . where are you going?"

D soon returned.

"Iriya . . ."

Meeker looked down sadly at her. When she saw how his eyes glistened, Iriya's eyes filled with tears as well.

“You’ve made me so happy . . . Meeker . . . Thanks . . . I . . . I’m glad . . . So glad . . . So scared . . . but I’m happy you’re here with me . . .”

Her voice dwindled rapidly.

“Miss Iriya,” Meeker whispered.

Iriya’s eyes, just about to close, shifted.

“Chulos? Is that you, Chulos? I . . . I’m so glad you came to see me off . . . Do you mind if I ask you something? Can’t remember just when . . . but I get this feeling . . . I heard Gia’s song . . . As if our sister . . . was here with me . . . And Yan . . . and Shezk . . . and Pol . . . and Maggie too . . . They all came . . . Oh, how nice . . . I’m glad . . .”

D took his left hand away from the forehead of an ordinary girl with a smile on her face. Iriya had left with her family.

“Iriya . . .” the boy murmured. “I don’t know what to say . . .”

“Say goodbye,” D told him.

A long time had passed since a fresher goodbye had been carried off by the wind. In a tiny hamlet near the ruins of a certain Noble’s castle was a graveyard with a small grave. The sturdy rock tablet was inscribed with the name of a certain family, and the mason who’d carved it could well remember the young man of unearthly beauty and the innocent boy who’d ordered it. There was also an aged grave keeper who recalled a young man who paid a visit on the same day every year. Just once did the grave keeper ask that young man his name as he offered his prayers at the grave. The young man smiled but didn’t reply.

And then one evening years and years after the stone had been erected, the grave keeper visited the cemetery and found a figure in black before the grave. The nearsighted grave keeper didn't get a good look at his face, but as the man rode by on his horse, he asked in a voice like iron if anyone ever visited that grave.

"Yep, every year without fail," he replied, at which the young man on the horse is said to have smiled quietly.

"Putting that smile there is the only thing in my dull old life I'm proud of!" the grave keeper would always say. He never tired of telling the tale.

the end

Postscript

As far back as I can remember, I didn't like the heroines in adventure movies. No matter how I looked at it, they seemed to serve no purpose other than to slow the hero down or get into trouble. Were it not for them, the heroes would've been able to accomplish their ends in less than half the movie's running time without being in any danger. Heroines were no more than a bit of color—or so I believed. But my mind changed when I started writing novels. Though they might have added color, heroines were also necessary. I wouldn't want to read a full-length novel with no characters but men, even on a dare.

In my debut novel, *Demon City Shinjuku*, I tried my hand at creating a heroine true to the mold. Quiet and innocent, but capable of action that shows her inner strength in a flash—do you see what I'm driving at? This was unbelievably tough to write. As the typical heroine serves to build up the hero, she can't be more active than he is, and she inevitably finds herself in terrible predicaments. How conventional! Do women that lovely and simple even exist in this day and age? More to the point, that sort of character really wasn't suited to my writing.

As a result, for my second book, *Vampire Hunter D*, I created the stalwart Doris, who battles a vampire to keep her little brother safe. However, in the presence of D, she still reverts to being an average woman. Something was missing!

For my third book, *Alien: Hidden Treasure Town*, I tried to make up for what the previous book had lacked. Yuki, the heroine who works with high-school treasure hunter Dai Yagashira, represented my ideal. Money grubbing and willing to put her feminine charms to use even when they're not entirely called for, she would be only too happy to double-cross Dai for profit, despite the fact that the two of them live together. When the going gets tough, she has no compunction about hiding behind the same man she's just betrayed. What's more, she's so self-centered that she never gives the slightest thought to all the trouble she causes those around her. She just flies recklessly ahead, putting herself and everyone with her into constant danger. And she's completely unrepentant. Oh, how my pen raced across the paper. *Now this is a heroine*, I thought, giving Miss Yuki a round of applause.

Nevertheless, it's difficult to deny these heroines somehow wind up as subordinate characters in a herocentric universe. They absolutely cannot overshadow the hero. *Iriya the Berserker* represents my greatest resistance to the concept of the subordinate heroine. I wanted to create a heroine who could antagonize D, the most powerful hero of all my books—and that was how Iriya came to be. I hope you'll decide for

yourself whether or not I succeeded in doing so.

Hideyuki Kikuchi
May 30, 2015
While watching *Only Lovers Left Alive*

And now, a preview of the next book in the
Vampire Hunter D series

Vampire Hunter D

Volume 24

A Throng of Heretics

Written by
Hideyuki Kikuchi

Illustrations by
Yoshitaka Amano

English translation by
Kevin Leahy

Coming August 2016 from Dark Horse Books

Black Easter

chapter 1

I

It had stood there for precisely three hundred years. According to the standard map of the Frontier drawn up by the Bureau of Geography in the Capital, it was located five yards above points Z-444 and 424. All those years ago, there had been humans who could make use of the Nobility's technology. Perhaps they'd worked in one of the Nobles' science centers or an engineering plaza. All it knew was that precisely three hundred years had passed since it had gone into operation. Even among the descendants of those who'd built it or positioned it in its present location there were few who knew of its existence. Regardless, it now rounded out its third century of service.

Staining the edge of a chain of mountain peaks crimson, the sun sank in the west. Suddenly, it knew its task was over. The realization came just as the last remnants of redness vanished behind the mountains. Those long years of service were gone, and the longer years that should've been yet to come had disappeared as well. It activated the laser transmitter with which it was equipped, beamed a signal converted to electrical waves to its destination, and awaited the moment of truth.

"Now, I should like to discuss your work, gentlemen, as well as some relevant background," the hoary-headed, silver-bearded old man said to the five men seated before him in wooden chairs, his tone as unsociable as his expression.

Since the town hall had burned down two days earlier, the saloon that'd once been used as a meeting place had once again been pressed into service. Light flooded its interior. It was an hour past noon.

Though the old man had expected some hostility from them, two of the men merely shifted their upper bodies slightly. The dauntless demeanors of all who faced him were unchanged.

"Before we do," the big, fat man standing to the right of the older man began in a voice that sounded like he had something caught in his throat. The badge of a village sheriff caught the light from the cheap chandelier. "I've already told the mayor something about you, but at any rate, I'd like you to introduce yourselves." The corpulent figure stroked his badge with plump fingers.

Not only did the men not look at the star—they didn't even so much as glance at the lawman, either.

Turning to the aged mayor, the man on the far right practically groaned his introduction, saying, “Leica Slopey.” Both his ears were weirdly tapered, his mouth was disturbingly large, and the man’s exposed face and hands were oddly hirsute. His longsword had been removed from his belt and rested against his left arm.

“Hiki.”

The second man was terribly thin—so slight of build it looked like a strong breeze might blow him away. He was wrapped in a semitransparent film reminiscent of the wings of a mayfly. All he had for a weapon was the knife on his belt.

“Barry Dawn’s the name,” said the youngest of the five. There was something off kilter about the man, who had the gentle face of a woman attached to a ferocious physique. Those who saw only his face undoubtedly mistook him for a female. The longsword that rested against his left shoulder was longer than any of the others’, and its scabbard was nearly as long as his six-foot-eight stature.

“They call me the Confessor.”

On hearing the stocky man’s voice, the sheriff’s face relaxed with relief. Since arriving at the village, the man hadn’t said a single word. Had his likeness not been in the Hunter directory, the lawman wouldn’t have known what to do with him. His weapons were a run-of-the-mill short spear and a revolver he wore on his right hip. The bag that hung from his other hip undoubtedly contained ammunition.

“Quake Resden,” the last one said, thick, beard-hedged lips forming a smile. Unlike the other four, he had an air of normalcy about him. His eyes as well as his lips were nearly hidden by his scruffy growth of whiskers. He wore a cotton robe shaped like a potato sack, and oddly, from the waist down it was strung, front and back, with weights the size of a child’s fist. Though it seemed like the average person would hardly be able to move while wearing such a garment, he was such a mountain of a man that it wasn’t even an issue.

“The lot of you are ranked the greatest Vampire Hunters in the southern Frontier. The fact that you’ve been at it for more than a decade is proof enough of that. The average life expectancy of a Vampire Hunter is four years in the eastern Frontier, three and a half in the west, two in the north. In the southern Frontier—considered the most brutal of the bunch—it’s only a year and a half.”

The corpulent sheriff shot the mayor a sidelong glance. It’d been his job to summon the strange collection of men before them. On seeing the mayor nod, he was satisfied.

“Enough about us. Just as long as you know what you’re getting into. Let’s get down to business.”

The man named Leica twisted his lips. Though he brimmed with more wildness than any of them, he was also the most lacking in vigor.

Barry Dawn and Quake Resden looked at him from the corners of

their eyes and grinned.

Outside, the weather was sunny.

"Ahem." The sheriff cleared his throat, looking to the mayor. The mayor nodded.

"Five days ago," the old man began, "the regularly scheduled signal from Balsa Hill was interrupted. For the first time in three centuries. There have been no transmissions since. It is our opinion the surveillance system that's been sitting on top of that hill for the last three hundred years has been destroyed."

Mention of Balsa Hill sent a strange current swirling around the men. A cocktail of seven parts fight, two parts murderous intent. The remaining part they would never admit to. The smallestcomponent—but also the heaviest and most stuporous—was fear.

"No one goes near the hill. The surveillance equipment was built using Noble technology, so no human should be able to destroy it. I needn't say any more, I suppose. I trust you can see well enough what your job will entail." Here the mayor paused, running a wily gaze over the Hunters. "Don't tell me some of you are afraid."

As if that were their cue, the five men rose in unison. The whole room rocked. Looking up at the ceiling, the sheriff mumbled something about an earthquake.

The mayor's expression swiftly grew severe, and he said, "I'll be damned—who knew southern Hunters were all a bunch of cowards?"

His scornful words crumbled against the men, inflicting no harm.

"You know, we might be cowards, but we're not stupid," Barry Dawn said with a shrug of his shoulders. "The ruins of Viscount Xeno's castle are at the top of Balsa Hill. The ancestors of your villagers drove a wooden stake through the viscount's heart, and his kin sleep their unholy sleep up there. Looking back on it, I'm surprised they could've done something so nervy. Legend has it your ancestors delivered poisoned drink to the wedding reception for the viscount's daughter the night before, then burst in while the guests were paralyzed and slaughtered the lot. Women, children, servants—it didn't matter. Everyone got staked through the heart and beheaded. It's the one instance where history books in the Capital don't call it a *battle*; they label it a *massacre*."

"Be that as it may, it was a long time ago," the mayor replied, regaining his composure. "No one really knows the truth. The slipshod work of investigators from the Capital is well known. It's my considered opinion that, while they may have been a little out of line and may have slightly overreacted, the humans waged a just battle against the Nobility."

He ran his gaze over the group without trepidation. It was a prime display of his authority and oratory powers as the community's leader.

Suddenly, his eyes opened wide. In those eyes of blue, a red pair

glowed. His eyes had met those of the man who called himself the Confessor.

As if somewhat drunk, the mayor slurred his speech as he continued, "The villagers, led by my ancestor Dominic Krishken, forced their way into the castle of the Xeno clan. Dominic left a detailed account of that day in his journal. I've read it. As you just said, led by Dominic, the villagers put down Nobles weakened by poisoned drink, one after another, before they could flee to their graves. Apparently their blood pooled an inch and a half deep on the floor of the great hall. But the most fearsome of the bunch, Viscount Xeno's son and his four cousins, narrowly escaped, fleeing to the crypts beneath the castle to slumber. Fearing their vengeance, our ancestors used mining equipment and vast amounts of explosives to level the castle and block the entrance to the crypts with tens of thousands of tons of rubble. They then set a sensor on top of that, to warn us should the five slumbering Nobles awaken. That was three centuries ago. That's a long time. More than enough time for our ancestors to pass away and the villagers to forget all about the Xeno clan. But to the Nobility—to immortals—three centuries or a million years are no different from an hour. They're coming. I'm sure of it. Nobles never forgive human insurrections. Particularly one like this, where they were blindsided and killed so underhandedly. There's no denying it was a slaughter. Dominic wrote in his journal about how the castle was strewn with the heads and limbs of the Nobles' children . . ."

At that point the mayor put his hand to his brow, his upper body twisting theatrically. Straightening up again, he took his hand from his forehead and slapped it over his mouth in shock, groaning with disbelief. "I . . . er . . . What was I saying?"

"Well, you just gave us proof it wasn't a *battle*; it was a *massacre*." Barry Dawn grinned with his thin lips. He then looked straight at the Confessor and said, "That's one weird little talent you've got there. Whatever you do, keep it away from me, all right?"

"The Xeno clan was legendary for their cruelty. Various accounts say his son and those four cousins in particular were so cold blooded even other Nobility were afraid of them. If they're fired up for revenge, especially against someone who butchered their kin in such a dastardly way, this won't be any ol' vengeance," said the man who'd identified himself as Hiki. With every word he said, the film he wore swayed like a mirage.

"We're not cowards, and we're not idiots either," Barry Dawn reiterated. "It's times like this you just have to say, 'He who fights and runs away lives to fight another day.' They're just too much to handle."

"Be seeing you," Leica Slopey said, raising one hand lethargically as he headed for the door.

The other four followed suit.

"Wait!" the mayor shouted, holding out his hand. "If you leave now,

I'll spread word across the whole Frontier that this job scared you off. You'll never work again!"

Quake Resden shrugged. "Can't work if we're dead, either."

As the warriors shuffled away, the mayor was so mad he could've stomped his feet, though he curbed his petulance and said, "All right, then. I'll double your rate—no, triple it!"

The men didn't halt.

"Damn it, how about four times?"

Leading the pack, Leica was almost to the door.

"*Five* times? No, make that—"

"Ten times."

The men stopped dead. This was exactly what people meant when they talked about being in lockstep.

As both the Hunters and the mayor stared at him, the sheriff sheepishly inquired, "How about it, Mr. Mayor?"

It was the lawman who'd offered them ten times their normal rate.

Knowing there was only one possible answer, the mayor nodded. "Fine—ten times it is."

"Just one more thing," said the taciturn giant—Quake Resden. "If one of us gets killed, I want his share to get divvied up between the survivors."

A strange mood swept over the group. They would benefit directly from the death of their colleagues. A simple and delightful economic facet had been added. It came as little surprise that the sheriff glanced over at the mayor, but the old man said nothing, merely nodding.

The men noisily clomped back to their seats. It was apparent these were true professionals.

II

"Five days have passed since the surveillance system was destroyed—that's too long," said Hiki. "In the interim, us Hunters have gotten no word of anything happening around Balsa Hill. How about you folks?"

The mayor shook his head.

The sheriff stepped in, saying, "Same here. Jagos is the nearest village to it, but just this morning we got word from their sheriff's office that nothing was out of the ordinary."

"By comm bug?" Barry Dawn asked.

"Yep. Why?"

"We can tell just by their voice if someone's a normal human or a Noble. Or a victim of the Nobility, for that matter."

"So can I!" the sheriff retorted, puffing his chest, but then his eyes went wide. It was a few seconds before he managed to say, "You don't mean to tell me . . ."

Comm bugs were insects that would repeat the words they were told. In that respect, they were like parrots. There was no way to tell

anything about the person who'd spoken those words to them.

"Don't tell me the village of Jagos has been . . ."

"It's been five days. If those five Nobles set their mind to it, even the most tightly guarded village couldn't fend them off for a single day."

"Then the comm bug . . . From one of the villagers they turned . . . ?"

"No doubt. Jagos has a population of roughly two hundred and fifty. That's more than enough to slake their thirst for blood and yearning for slaughter, and they'd go through them in a day. If they dawdled too long, nearby villages might take notice. We must assume they've long since taken leave of the village, leaving behind the villagers they fed on. Reports that nothing was out of the ordinary probably came from villagers trying to lure in fresh victims."

The subject was so horrible the sheriff made a choking sound.

"Well, where are they, then?"

To the sheriff's quavering inquiry, Barry replied, "No idea. Could be they're headed for another, bigger village. As I recall, about a hundred and twenty miles south of Balsa Hill there's the town of Calico, right? There you've got flights to the Capital and regularly scheduled buses. But if I were a blood-starved Noble, the first thing I'd do is attack the nearest village. Once I'd satisfied my craving, I'd head straight out to exact my vengeance. I'd ignore Calico."

Suddenly the mayor sank. He settled into the chair behind him—well, not so much *settled* as *collapsed*. The twitch in his face that rocked his white beard and the vacant look in his eyes announced that he'd realized nothing short of his own fate. Nothing could be crueler.

"My daughter . . . Annette . . . is coming home from the Capital . . ." he said as if delirious, squeezing the words through parched lips. "The university's on holiday . . . This afternoon . . . she'll be arriving at Calico's airport . . . Tomorrow, she'll head back here . . . And *they* know it . . ."

"How?" the sheriff asked, furrowing his brow. He wanted to throw his badge in the trash at this point.

"Jagos . . . My daughter's nanny lives in the village . . . I've heard she and my daughter still correspond . . . I'm sure she'd know about her vacation plans . . ."

"I see. First, they'll hit you where it hurts, eh? Tear the descendant of their hated foe limb from limb—no, they'll probably make her one of them. That would be the ultimate revenge!" the Confessor said with relish, but the mayor didn't even have the strength to rail at the man.

"Set off at once. First, my daughter—you must protect my Annette. Once she's safe, destroy them. Turn every last one of them to dust."

The mayor's words had begun to spin from dazed to crazed, but they sounded like derisive laughter to Barry Dawn as he said, "The town of Calico's a full day's ride on a fast horse. We'd better get going. You happen to have a picture of your daughter?"

“Come to my house,” replied the mayor, staggering to his feet.

“She’s a hell of a looker,” Barry Dawn said, holding the photo up over his head and shutting one eye.

“You can say that again. If I’d known that, I’d have told you to pay me half wages and throw in this little lady!” Hiki chimed in.

The group was on the street in front of the mayor’s house. All of them were astride cyborg horses, and at first glance they just seemed to be hanging around chatting, yet an air of danger emanated from them. The battle wouldn’t begin when they came into contact with the Nobles. It would begin sooner—right now, in fact. The chances of them cooperating seemed about as likely as an atheist believing in God. The instant they’d learned the deaths of their peers would increase their own compensation, they’d all become enemies—almost as much as the Nobility were.

High in the saddle and looking as gloomy as ever, Leica said, “We’re all in the same boat. From here on out, we’re rivals! Godspeed to you.”

And saying that, he gave a kick to his horse’s flanks and galloped off to the north.

“Oh, no you don’t!”

“You won’t steal a march on me!”

With those cries, the Confessor and Barry Dawn gave chase.

Quake Resden was also about to gallop off, but he quickly pulled back on the reins to stop his horse, then craned his bull neck toward the last of the group—Hiki. He alone showed no signs of following the pack.

“Aren’t you going?”

From the back of his steed, the slim seraphim of a man grinned faintly.

“Sure I am. Last to leave, and first to arrive. Off you go, and don’t you worry about me. We’ll meet again after I’ve taken care of those lousy Nobles.”

In response to those strangely confident remarks, the giant raised one hand and rode off.

Once the figure who looked like he’d crush his horse at any moment had disappeared down the road, Hiki spread his arms from his spot in the saddle. The sleeves of his thin garment that ran from his wrists to his ankles almost like wings became taut membranes.

“No wind, eh? Let’s make some, then.”

His slender foot kicked his horse’s flank. The cyborg horse galloped off down a road in the opposite direction from the man’s four colleagues.

“Last to leave, and first to arrive,” Hiki murmured as if the words were a spell—then he lightly jumped up on top of his saddle and spread his arms.

The pair of membranes caught the wind, billowing out behind him. Like the wings of an angel. And then Hiki's body drifted into the air, quickly rising higher and higher. Just like an angel. Perhaps that was why his name was written with the ancient characters for *flight* and *demon*. Catching the wind—or the airflow from his cyborg horse's mad gallop—he had become a bird.

It seemed the animal had been well trained, because on losing its master, the cyborg horse halted and raised its head, spotting the figure that'd already been reduced to a speck. Before long, the speck was flying north at a speed no bird could ever match, and the horse began to give chase with the wind swirling in its wake. No one save this faithful steed knew that its sky-bound master was now flying at a rate easily in excess of the speed of sound.

Three hours later, a comm bug from the town of Calico brought the sheriff shocking news. With the insect in hand, the lawman ran to the mayor's house and had it repeat what it'd told him.

"The village of Jagos is gone? Burned to the ground?" the mayor asked once more, and the locust-like comm bug responded in the affirmative. As a product of the Nobility, not only could the insect understand human speech and engage in conversation; it could also fly to its destination at supersonic speeds.

"Five days ago, someone attacked the village of Jagos, turning its inhabitants into servants of the Nobility. For four days no travelers passed through there, but on the morning of the fifth day the town of Calico received this information via a comm bug from a traveler paying a call on the village."

Word of this incident had shocked the town of Calico, and the reconnaissance party that was immediately dispatched had confirmed the accuracy of the traveler's report. In Jagos, they found the villagers sleeping in their houses with all the windows shut, their fangs exposed. However, there'd only been five of them—the rest were in the village meeting place. They'd been reduced to brutalized corpses, their limbs ripped or chopped off. The reconnaissance party had been reminded of the end the Xeno clan had met.

According to the comm bug, the strange devastation had come as evening approached. Having completed their investigation, the reconnaissance party had left the village, but they'd spotted an aircraft before making their exit. For roughly an hour it'd circled at an altitude of about a thousand feet as if waiting for the group to leave, and once the reconnaissance party was some fifteen hundred feet from the village, the craft dropped something. Purely by chance, one member of the reconnaissance party happened to see it fall.

"And then, the village was enveloped in flames."

At that last remark from the comm bug, the mayor closed his eyes. The sheriff couldn't tell whether the old man was trying to picture the fiery inferno or expel it from his memory. The lawman immediately thought of something else: the subject he'd discussed with the five Hunters just before they'd left.

After slaking their thirst in the village of Jagos and playing out their bloody vengeance, where had the Noblemen vanished to? And then, on noticing a certain sound, he turned his gaze out the window to a world approaching nightfall.

Damn it all. Rain at this, of all times? If they run into those bastards soaked to the skin, they'll be off to their final reward! Of all the shitty luck.

In the blink of an eye, the light rains that'd started just around noontime had become a torrential downpour—the kind of heavy rain unique to the Frontier that would hammer those on the road. *Hammer* them? The terrible precipitation could strike a person with the same force as hail, leaving unprepared travelers unconscious on the road and openly inviting death. On meeting with the kind of downpour that occasionally killed even monsters, people would go into their homes, while travelers would either make use of a portable tent or retreat to one of the emergency shelters situated along the highways, where they'd pray that the savage rains wouldn't become a thunder-and-lightning storm. Out on the Frontier, lightning would split massive trees and shatter boulders just like the spear of a great god of antiquity. Even greater fire dragons and armored beasts wouldn't escape instantaneous death if they were struck. As a result, the people of the Frontier had come to refer to the lightning that bleached those downpours as "the Glittering Gates to the Land of the Dead."

Out in those fearsome rains, a carriage raced recklessly on. It was a coach that'd been hired in town. Unfortunately for both thepassenger and the driver, the day of their departure had been blessed with sunshine and blue skies. The crowning piece of misfortune was the fact that the aircraft carrying this passenger had arrived from the Capital more than an hour ahead of schedule. By the time the downpour hit them, the coach was in the middle of a high pass where both pressing on and turning back seemed impossible. While the driver recommended turning back, the passenger had insisted that they press on. She said if they continued for three miles beyond the pass, there'd be a shelter there. The driver, who'd actually been on the fence about what to do, decided to go for it.

Now the rain sprayed off the carriage so hard it left a white haze over it as it was coming up on the crest of the pass.

"We made it," the driver announced with an approximation of relief from beneath his vinyl slicker.

It was unclear whether the flash of white that bleached the world then was a celebration of that fact or just a mocking bit of irony. Only a heartbeat later came a crack of thunder like the howl of a colossal beast.

The pair of cyborg horses reared on their hind legs in an expression of an instinct they'd had since before their conversion: fear.

"Gates to the Land of the Dead?" the driver murmured in a dazed tone as he desperately fought the panicked horses. "Got no choice but to shoot down from the pass in one go. Don't know if the footing will be safe or not, though."

As if his grumbling had been overheard, a voice from the brass communication tube to the right of his seat said, "It's okay. Just keep going." It was the strong yet cultured voice of a young lady.

Like I needed you to tell me that, the driver thought to himself, but recalling how she'd overruled him when he wasn't sure whether or not they could make it over the pass, he responded, "Well, I aim to."

He raised his whip in defeat.

III

Before he could strike a fresh blow with that coiling serpent of a whip, its length drooped down weakly. The driver had raised his right hand high but then forgot to follow through with the motion as he peered into the darkness ahead. He was certain the lightning that'd just flashed had picked out the form of a horse and rider.

One more time, the driver pleaded in his heart. *I'm begging you, just let me see that gorgeous face one more time.*

His wish was answered. Answered by a voice even more lovely than the face burned into the back of his eyelids.

"It would seem you're in a bit of a jam, are you not?" said a voice that issued from the vicinity of the rider's face. It had a ring to it so mysterious that it made the driver tremble again. However, its tone was no more than a whisper. So how could it reach his ears through such a deafening downpour?

As if to respond in kind, the driver lowered his voice as well, saying, "No, not really. I was just thinking over whether to head down now or to sit the rain out here."

"And which did you decide upon?" the rider asked, apparently able to catch the driver's hushed tone as well.

Even as his body melted into warm putty with rapture, the driver felt a chill.

"Well, I'm gonna head on down."

"That's the proper choice. Though sitting the rain out here would also be the proper choice."

"How's that?"

The voice rang out again, gloomy and gorgeous in the darkness.

"However, there's an even *better* choice!"

The driver was at a loss for words.

"The passenger in your coach is a young woman, is it not?"

Still nothing from the driver.

"She would've arrived at Calico Airfield from the Capital just past noon today. Is that not correct?"

The driver had the feeling he'd been caught up in some awesome fate—a fate gone horribly wrong.

"I should like to confirm her name with you. What does she go by?"

Silence spread. On the road through the pass, with the darkness and the rain.

Yet through it all, a sharp tone replied, "I'm Annette Krishken! Do you have some business with me?"

Before the driver could open his mouth, a trembling voice like a plucking of golden harp strings covered with blood said, "Yes—just as I thought."

To the driver, the speaker sounded moved nearly to tears.

"I was so excited, I set out before my compatriots and arrived first. I knew out on the plains it would be impossible to miss you. It was in this auspicious spot that long ago our clan discovered Grand Duke Jekyll's army in a driving rain, striking the first blow and wiping them out. Come to think of it, the hour is nearly the same, and just look at the weather. It must be through divine providence that I can now make the daughter of our nemesis one of our kind in this very place. Woman—descendant of the Krishkens—step down from the coach."

"Now wait just a minute," the driver interrupted. The speaker's words had returned him to his senses. Letting the whip in his right hand lie across his knees, he said, "Just who in the name of hell are you, buster? Since you've flat out ignored me, I don't give a good goddamn about anything you have to say."

"And you shall stop me?" the voice from the darkness asked with amusement.

"It's my job to see to it my passenger makes it safely to her destination. Sorry, but as a rule, this is how I deal with thieves, highwaymen, and kidnappers."

He turned the butt end of the whip toward the source of the voice. A concealed trigger was revealed, and the driver's finger curled around it and pulled. Though he held the weapon at waist level, long experience guaranteed the accuracy of his aim.

With an impact like a scorching blow from a small dragon, a ball of hot lead was swallowed up into pitch-blackness. The man's gut. While that wasn't as lethal as a shot through the heart, ninety-nine times out of a hundred it would take the fight out of an opponent.

For his next attack the driver discarded the whip, grabbing the repeating rifle that stood next to his seat. This time he took careful aim. He braced the weapon against his shoulder.

Suddenly white flames glowed before his eyes, not two inches from him. No, not flames, but a pale face. It only looked like flame on account of its beauty. Before he could even wonder if there could be a man with such exquisite features in this world, the driver was drowning in that beauty. He didn't even have time enough to question when the man had come right up in front of him.

The gun fell.

The other man's face smiled alluringly.

"My name is Baron Nichol Hayden, of the first house of Xeno. When you reach the hereafter, you may tell them this: *I had the good fortune of being sent to hell by a kiss from the esteemed baron.*"

And then the driver was as motionless as if he hung in midair while the alluring red lips of the other face pressed to his like a lover's. Two seconds passed . . . three . . . A bewitching moment in the darkness where none would see. Even the thunder held its breath.

Finally, the pale face pulled away. The driver's face didn't move.

Lightning zipped down. The face it illuminated was as shriveled and dry as that of a mummy. Like a dead branch, the body dropped jerkily from the driver's seat to the ground, its fall punctuated by a roar of thunder.

"The obstacle has been removed. Come, child!" She was addressed by a face that'd returned to its place atop the steed. "You saw the kiss I just gave, did you not? Do you find me comely? If so, there shall be no escape for you. Come out. Surrender to the desire burning so fervently in your heart, and accept my kiss."

His face was turned toward the coach door, watching.

It wasn't long before it opened from within. The girl who stepped out into the falling rain looked to be about sixteen or seventeen years of age. She wore a frilly white blouse and a blue skirt that went down to her ankles. Rain bounced off her round-brimmed hat decorated with flowers. And just as Baron Hayden had suggested, she swooned before his pale countenance, far lovelier than her flowers or even the girl herself. She was as if mesmerized by his good looks—the mind of the pure girl controlled by lewd thoughts.

Baron Hayden let a little smile escape, as if his work were a fait accompli.

"Come," he commanded.

A flash of light exposed him on his white steed for a single instant. A long robe the color of darkness covered him to the knees, and if he were to dismount, it would undoubtedly conceal his boots of the same color as well.

Annette walked up to him. Leaning over in the saddle, the baron cupped her face between his hands.

"Though it's a shame to drain the life from one so lovely, my hatred burns hotter than the flames of hell. Your death will no doubt plunge

your father, your mother—your entire family into a boiling morass of grief. Such a sweet expectation."

He whispered those deadly words from a position so close their lips nearly touched.

The girl let out a gasp. But was it a groan of fear, or an exhilarated moan?

The baron turned his grinning face ever so slightly, preparing for that deadly kiss, and then—

The baron spun around as if he'd been shot. It was toward the same road through the pass that'd brought him here that he turned. Perhaps seeing something through that weighty darkness, perhaps hearing something, he cocked a willow-thin eyebrow. There was no more laughter swimming in confidence.

"They come. My compatriots are on their way. But before them comes a lone rider—oh, who could this be? Can you see him, child? My hands are trembling. My feet are riveted. My heart hammers madly. Tell me, if you will, what is this I feel? Is this the thing known as fear?"

However, the baron's eyes were wildly aglitter, and a pair of gleaming, sharp fangs poked from the corners of his mouth. His body swelled with enmity and the lust for battle.

"I shan't let anyone have you. Here and now, you shall receive my kiss."

And as he spoke, his deadly lips drew closer. The baron hadsupreme confidence in his abilities—and in the fact that the girl would let him do this without showing a whit of resistance.

The heavens and earth were bleached white. The Nobleman's handsome visage twisted in amazement. Annette backed away wildly. Her rain-slick face had returned to its senses—no, if anything, it was more feverish than ever with rapture.

The baron realized the girl was looking over his shoulder at something. Now he had no choice but to turn.

Again lightning flashed, revealing the sight to him. A stark image of a rider in black on a black steed about fifteen feet behind them. Beneath the wide-brimmed traveler's hat, an exquisite visage was trained on him.

"Who in the hell are *you*?" the Nobleman asked in a groan that reeked of defeat and despair.

Rather than surprise at how the rider could draw so close without being detected by his superior Noble senses, it was humiliation the baron felt as those gorgeous features seared his body. For the traveler's face, illuminated by the lightning, was ten thousand times more exquisite than his own.

"Identify yourself. I should like to know your name. Your name, sir!"

Though the baron bellowed like a madman, there was no reply. Almost as if it were a reminder of one of the laws of the Frontier—there was no need to give your name to those who didn't give theirs.

Suddenly, a different voice cried out. “This man is of the Xeno line. He said he’s Baron Nichol Hayden. And he came here to abduct me!” Annette shouted as her whole body went as limp as a wet doll.

“If you’ll move, I’ll be on my way,” said a voice of steel struck by the rain. “I may make my living off the Nobility, but I’m not under contract to hunt this man.”

“No . . .”

As Annette stood rooted in astonishment, her ears caught the clopping of the approaching cyborg horse’s hooves in the mud. It was going to pass right by them.

Two voices rang out at once.

“You can’t . . .” Annette moaned dolefully.

“Hold,” the baron groaned in a voice mad with resentment.

The rider in black didn’t halt his steed but rather rode on. He was almost to the point where the road began its descent.

“Hold,” the baron groaned once more, gnashing his teeth. “My name is Baron Nichol Hayden of the same Xeno clan the Sacred Ancestor honored with control of the southern Frontier wards. I shall not allow you to leave. No, this is unforgivable. No man should be more gorgeous than me.” After drawing a breath, he continued, “Such beauty. You will not always be counted among humans. Tell me your name.”

A flash of light lit the world like midday. Lit the rider.

Annette swooned. Even the rage-twisted Baron Hayden lost himself in rapture for a moment. Though neither of them could see anything but the figure’s back, that in itself was enough to refresh the memory of his exquisite features.

The figure in black rode away as easily as if he were on a peaceful lane.

“I shan’t let you go!”

With that spiteful declaration of war, the baron urged his horse forward. His obsession reduced the lashing rain to steam as he closed on the rider ahead of him. He covered thirty feet in a heartbeat.

Lightning flashed. Annette saw a different gleam.

The baron and his steed had passed the rider in black on his right, stopping in front of him and turning to face him. Rain bounced off the strange weapon in the baron’s right hand. Though its blade was more than a foot long, it was so thick it seemed it would easily slice even the body of an armored beast in half. If an ancient human had seen it, they might’ve found it resembled a Japanese pole arm called a *naginata*. The Noble had kept it hidden either beneath his robes or on one side of his saddle. It didn’t seem the sort of thing a mere mortal could wield with just one hand.

Not moving a muscle in the saddle, the baron said, “Identify yourself.”

“D.”

At that same moment, the top half of the baron's torso slid off at an angle and fell to the ground. Black blood fountained up, raining down on both the half still in the saddle and the one on the ground. Naturally, Annette hadn't known that the Nobleman had been cut in two from the left base of his neck to his right hip in the instant he and the Hunter passed each other.

The black horse and rider began to walk off. Only then did Annette notice the longsword the figure in black gripped in his right hand.